

It's a Mall World

Abused yet used -- strip malls endure through sheer utility.

By Ben Fulton

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Architect Fred C. Cox loves showing off his latest projects, built or yet to be built. Driving around Bountiful in his white Cadillac, he proudly points toward sites of future projects for which he'll draw the design.

"This is going to be a multi-tenant retail building right here," he says with a humble tone. Then it's off to a field just north of Woods Cross High School. It's a mere grass field now, but soon it will be a car dealership. It wasn't but an hour ago that he was showing off his current pride and joy, a "multi-unit retail center," as Cox calls it, at the corner of 500 West and 1500 South. When you're in the business of commercial retail or commercial architecture, words like "strip mall" somehow get discarded.

As strip malls go, it's a classy little number. The one-story building, already leased out to an investment firm and mortgage company, sports a nice swathe of grass between the building and sidewalk. Faux-antique street lamps effectively book-end the development's walkway, as do an inviting bench and lunch table. A shrub trimmed into several orb-shaped fixtures sits in a large pot nearby. Best of all, the developer left a sizable ash tree standing at the south end. The "sea of parking," that large field of asphalt between sidewalk and storefront you might get at a Fred Meyer or "Family Center," is instead a small pond of parking spaces shifted to the side.

Could you still call this a strip mall? It's debatable. Either way, Cox's way with retail layout is a quiet rebellion. He's out to change the way strip malls are assembled—when the developer and jurisdiction will allow it, of course.

"I used to say I'd drawn more jail cells and parking lots than anyone I knew. But I enjoy working on retail centers and, where possible, also something that works for pedestrians," he says, standing next to the bench. "I've worked on projects where the only way to get to the building was a car. The sea of cars between the sidewalk and the building—that does bother me. I believe strip malls can become more Main Street in feel, and still work in today's market."

It may seem a bit hard to buy his argument with cars whizzing through the intersection as he talks. But there's no denying that the sight of people strolling a walkway so close to storefronts isn't something you'd see at one of the many "Family Center" mega strips. This is pedestrian-friendly, something Cox defines as the ability to walk from sidewalk to storefront without getting hit by a car.

"That's not the highest level of what we'd call pedestrian-friendly, but that's what it means at a basic level," he says with a knowing smile.

Cox has already worked two promising business referrals out of this recently completed development. A developer or two drive past it, like the look and give Cox a phone call.

But in the wild and wacky world of commercial retail development, only a fool would predict the end product. There are set-back requirements (distance from property line to building), parking-to-square-foot ratios, and landscape requirements. All three elements could land anywhere depending on the complex mix and match between a jurisdiction's zoning ordinances and the developer's needs. Sometimes it's the developer who wants a traditional strip mall or big-box development and becomes unyielding in its demands. Other times, it's the jurisdiction that flubs what could have been retail space with a difference.

"Because of a jurisdiction's difficulty to get different uses approved, or because of its unwillingness to look at new concepts, a project can end up as traditional, big-box retail," Cox said. Tragically, blueprints are something you draw while the real forces behind development are making other plans.

Then there are those who'd like to make sure that the next strip mall—traditional, "big box" or otherwise—is the one that never gets built. Question is, do they drive? The best way to make them go away is to give up the habit of driving.

"In some projects I've worked on, giving up on even one parking space will decrease the size of the building," Cox says.

As retail space, strip malls have all the pull of a mousetrap. Drive up. Walk in. Drive away. Nothing cuts the distance between consumer and car shorter. And by virtue of their overwhelming numbers, they lose any claim to being unique. That goes without saying, really. A lot of us don't even give them second thought anymore. As architectural creations, they're charmless. Some would call them architectural anti-matter. That crowd might want to give the strip mall phenomenon a deeper look.

In 1968, three Yale professors from the university's school of art and architecture packed a whole group of students onto a plane and went to Las Vegas for a field trip in studied observation of the city's naturally occurring structures and urban planning. In contrast to the painstakingly crafted designs of renowned architects, Las Vegas' landscape sprang from the more pragmatic needs of commerce, convenience and, yes, even kitsch. The team's observations and conclusions were published four years later in the book *Learning from Las Vegas*. The authors—Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise S. Brown—seemed to say that architects should let their hair down, stop using their blueprints as an ego-driven tool of self-expression, and start designing with more common needs and tastes in mind. One section of the book, "Ugly and Ordinary Architecture, or the Decorated Shed," lauds the sign-covered "decorated shed" of the city's strip architecture. In its own hyper-structured way, is not Caesar's Palace a glorified strip mall? If we're going to talk about seas of parking, we might as well talk about whole oceans.

Of course, all this really got started with the advent of the car, followed by the advent of even faster cars. The death throes of Main Street America can at least be traced back to the 1920s. Richard Ingersoll, in his book *Death of the Street*, cites Houston as the place where all the big changes went down. In 1920, downtown Houston was still dotted by canopied cafes, stores and markets. Then cars cut into those precious local meeting places. The markets left as parking spaces popped up. And by 1928, Houston gave birth to what, for all practical purposes, could easily be called America's first strip mall—perhaps even the world's. Ingersoll's cutline near a photo of The ABC Store says it all: "This early shopping facility on the edge of downtown Houston was much admired for its ample parking lot."

Salt Lake City wasn't far behind. Gene Carr, an adjunct professor of urban planning at the University of Utah, remembers well the days when almost everything a Salt Laker wanted to see or do could be found downtown. Then the valley spread out as more and more people acquired cars. Salt Lake County grew, Salt Lake City didn't. Cottonwood Mall became the valley's first suburban shopping center. Developers transferred as many trappings of Main Street as they could inside an enclosed space, where people walked amid benches and potted plants with stores on both sides vying for consumer attention. Shops, stores and the material goods they contained became the focus of attention, while the social and community aspects of a public space evaporated. No street performers, no one hawking political tracts, and very little chance that you might run into a friend. American life had become hermetically sealed, nightmarishly sanitized.

Filmmaker George Romero thought nothing of filling an entire Pennsylvania shopping mall full of flesh-eating, green-faced zombies shuffling from store to store in his 1978 film *Dawn of the Dead*. Although savagely satirical and graphic in its point, it's worth watching simply to understand why malls have become so reviled in some architectural and urban planning circles.

Today most of us are comfortable with the mall format. So much so that it's no longer the format, but the location that matters most. The fact that the downtown Nordstrom operates inside a shopping mall seems irrelevant. Its Main Street address, however, means everything. Even if most of us no longer venture downtown on a regular basis, downtown is still a symbolic location of great importance. Even if we've abandoned it, we still hang on to it. No wonder so many people work themselves into high dudgeon over the chance that Nordstrom might move to Gateway.

Versed in the terminology of urban planning, Carr isn't interested in just strip malls. He knows there are levels of malls, each supporting different amounts of population. There's the community mall serving 200,000 to 400,000 people. There's the regional mall serving up millions of square feet to more than 400,000. Why do they happen? Americans are obsessed by notions of private property and entranced by cars. If a farming family in Europe wanted to sell its land just outside of city limits to developers, they'd face a skeptical planning committee. Here we tell the bureaucrats to go to hell.

"The automobile has really contributed to our denial of public spaces and our loss of them," Carr said. "With malls we try to recreate the old market place that spawned human culture and human cities. We have a long ways to go if we want to turn this around. It's like trying to turn around an aircraft carrier going full speed ahead."

As cars got faster, the parking lots got bigger. So did the signs at the edge of the outdoor parking lot. Fast cars can't see small signs. The rest is history, all easily visible with a drive down Redwood Road or even parts of 400 South. Park. Walk. Buy. Drive away. Repeat as necessary. On and on it goes, with endless parking pavements playing host to connected retail units of dry cleaners, Chinese buffets, video stores and pet shop supplies. It's enough to make you want to find an indoor shopping mall that at least tries to imitate that Main Street feel of yore. At least there you get the chance of a different parking experience. Multilevel or underground, you might get the chance to ride an elevator.

Strip malls' avid foes have little interest in intellectualizing or tracking the history of this ever-expanding form of urban and suburban fungi. They just want to see it go away. The numerous community groups that suddenly spring up once news of a Wal-Mart, Home Depot or other "big box" strip mall announces itself is testament to that fact. Smaller, neighborhood strip malls may be unsightly, but at least they don't attract the mass of cars generated by a "big box."

The fact is, local shopping areas free of strip-mall qualities usually have the distinction of having evolved before cars claimed American life for real. The much feted 9th and 9th area is a prime example.

Then there's Sugar House, which proudly defends its "storefront" heritage by keeping parking lots well hidden. The results range from impressive to mixed. The Barnes & Noble complex, joined at the street by a Wild Oats down the block, effectively turned the strip mall model in on itself. The sea of parking becomes a sort of valley lake, something you don't see until you drive into it. Ditto for the stores laid out inside the squared complex.

A few blocks west, at 724 E. 2100 South, the Circuit City store keeps its parking in the back all right, but at a cost. Pedestrians walk past a mass of high brick wall with no windows, while neighborhood residents in back put up with the parking lot. It's a "big-box" development with its back turned. If the fact that most people drive to errands or shopping centers can't be changed, it can at least be hidden from view.

One year, the battle turned ugly. Right in the middle of a rezoning plan in 1999, Sugar House got caught with its guard down when the developer for Walgreen's Western region stores filed plans for a strip-mall style store in the heart of the district. When the city protested, the developer filed suit. Walgreen refused to place its parking in the back, in true Sugar House tradition. But Walgreen gave residents the small concessions of a bit of landscaping between the parking lot and sidewalk, plus a jewelry store hut near the sidewalk for a bit of "storefront" feel. Still, it left some in Sugar House so angry, there was talk of boycotting the development once it opened. The spirit of that fight continues today as Sugar House residents do battle with Smith's Food and Drug over a planned redesign of its store that would make its parking area more prominently displayed as people enter the area's business district.

"Sugar House is a location that already had a village format, and we want to reinforce that. We want a place where people know they can get a variety of things just by walking around," said Helen Peters, chair of the Sugar House Community Council. "I think we're very successful in attracting businesses and developers. They see the successes we've achieved. We've got a developer coming in with two restaurants that want to locate here, and we're looking at putting up public art so people will have even more to look at as they walk around."

Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson never kept his contempt for big-box and strip mall developments a secret. "Wouldn't it be nice to one day walk down the sidewalk without having to see a massive parking lot right alongside it?" the mayor once asked. One of his first planning directors, Stephen Goldsmith, made it a goal to promote more storefront developments throughout the city.

When an Ohio-based developer wanted to build a Grand Mall on 500 acres of land at 5600 West near I-80, Mayor Rocky Anderson immediately declared his opposition to this "sprawl mall." But because the mall was slated for the city's west side, something interesting happened. Opposition to or support for the project turned into a battle with class distinctions. Salt Lake City's upscale east siders may have had it with strip malls and shopping malls and their outdoor parking, but a lot of west-side residents wanted a shopping mall of their own. Who cared if it brought a sea of parking with it? The late state Sen. Pete Suazo complained about the fact that, if he wanted to buy a good pair of dress socks, he still had to drive east. One person's "sprawl mall" is another person's convenience.

Where strip malls are concerned, that class distinction still remains. Put simply, it's about money. Those with aesthetic considerations built into their material life might scoff at shopping at one of these places. Maybe that's because they're rich. Part of what you pay for at an upscale shop or store is the upscale location. That may be why strip malls are the lifeblood of so many small businesses or new businesses. Scoff at their scruffy interiors all you want, if there's a sign on the strip mall marquee, someone, somewhere has a job and pays taxes.

Perfect example: The Midtown Plaza at 1465 S. State. Since it was built some 15 years ago, this 15,000-square-foot strip with 42 parking spaces and adobe touches on the edge of its roof has played host to a soul food restaurant, numerous Asian and Mexican eating establishments, a gospel music store, a hair salon and at least two ethnic markets. By plan or accident, it's long been a small-business hub and, in many cases, the very definition of family, mom-and-pop businesses. You won't get that at the Gateway.

Nor will you get lease terms like \$14 per square foot plus a low common area maintenance, or "CAM," fee. If details like that bore you to tears, they're important numbers for anyone hoping to start a small business.

"The lowest rate per square foot most people are going to get right now is \$12," said Tracy Doong, an associate broker with Pentad Properties who leases the Midtown Plaza. "You don't see vacancies here very often."

It's not the medium of the strip mall itself that makes commercial space affordable. Aside from the mantra of location, there's size and the presence of anchor tenants. But if strip malls on a small scale didn't exist? "Businesses would have to pay more money, or go over to the west side," Doong said. "The only thing some people complain about here is a lack of parking."

"Lack of parking." Words like that induce panic in people who long for a different urban layout. They're also an occasion for sober reflection. If Cervantes were alive to rewrite his famous novel, he might have Don Quixote tilting against strip malls.

"The best compromise I've been able to come up with is parking on the side, still visible from the street," Cox says, casting over a mental picture of the many developments he's drawn up. "This seems to be about the best compromise between pedestrian-friendly and parking."

Let architects and developers in the real world search for such compromises. Behind all the attempts to dress them up, behind all the rhetoric vilifying them, strip malls reflect our culture back onto us. Do we dare look?

Aaron Titus, a recent graduate of the University of Utah's architecture program about to undertake his master's degree, found the study of strip malls a

refreshing stop between Frank Lloyd Wright and Bauhaus. Some architecture scholars would term strip malls “vernacular architecture” or, in the case of Las Vegas, “architainment.” After stopping at several strip malls across the Salt Lake Valley for some serious study, Titus came up with his own term: “toilet paper architecture.” That’s not necessarily a denigrating term, as he points out. The point is that strip malls, like toilet paper, are a static reminder of a mundane, necessary task no living person can dodge.

“The fact that they’re absolutely everywhere, and that we put up with them, shows just how much we need them,” Titus says. “We need them like we need toilet paper.”

During his travels, Titus found that only restaurants and banks try to set themselves apart from the larger strip mall nearby. Banks still like to retain an air of respectability. Most would not be caught dead as part of a strip mall. Titus found his favorite strip mall specimen in the Fort Union area—a sort of stripped-down strip mall.

“It was perfect,” he remembers. “It looked like it was struggling a bit because it didn’t have an anchor [tenant]. But it had all the elements of a strip mall: clearly defined store-front units, a unitless billboard or banner on top and a buffer zone parking lot that clearly determined the number of square feet. It was extroverted. It was a box with goop, designed to be as economically efficient as possible.”

One thousand years from now, when archaeologists sift through the debris of 21st century America to find the stucco, metal door handles and parking lamp lights of strip malls, they will come to several conclusions. “Here,” they might well say, “was a culture that valued speed, mobility and economic efficiency above all else.”

“Every piece of architecture has a job to do,” Titus says. “If you take a step back and look at this mundane architecture, there’s a lot to learn from it.”

For Salt Lake City Planning Director Louis Zunguze, strip malls are a lesson in what *not* to do. In the same spirit of Goldsmith and the mayor, Zunguze wants to see a gradual turnaround in the way Salt Lake City plans and builds its commercial life. He doesn’t buy the argument that strip malls are the natural outgrowth of modern American life. In the world of urban planning, nothing happens in isolation or by itself.

“These strip malls did not happen by accident,” he says. “The conventional wisdom is that it’s the result of market forces and free-market capitalism, but they’re also a function of zoning laws put into the community over several years. They’re clearly outdated now.”

That pronouncement rests, in part, on the belief that, sooner or later, people will realize that there’s a limit to what extent any urban landscape can be built around the automobile. The rub in all this is isolating cause and effect. Do people shop and travel by car because strip malls and big boxes abound? Or do strip malls and big boxes abound because people prefer their cars to mass transit and storefronts? How, and when, will we know that the tide has turned in favor of storefronts so that developers can safely relinquish any demands for copious parking?

Whichever way those forces flow, it can be argued that you do need the law on your side—at least to give people a gentle nudge in the right direction. The city’s “Walkable Communities Ordinance” is a target still coming into focus as the city’s planning commission meets with members of the City Council to hammer out a draft. Then it’s on to a dialogue with the local business community. Developers and retailers need to know, says Zunguze, that this will be a process full of reviews, with plenty of opportunity for feedback that will produce flexible and practical ordinances. The draft could be complete by the end of summer.

The ordinance is about weaning developers, and consumers, away from the automobile, by making walking and mass transit more possible by making it more attractive: build structures to the street, put more windows in those big boxes so people get more than just a wall and asphalt, put bikeways and crosswalks and more landscaping into the mix.

This isn’t a single-minded crusade against the car, says Zunguze. That’s foolhardy. Rather, it’s about making sure the car isn’t always the tail that wags the dog. Developments cannot accommodate the car to the exclusion of everything else. Little things like windows count.

“When you can look through a building’s glass instead of at a wall, that makes a difference,” he says. Lots of planning directors work for city administrations indifferent to urban aesthetics, the vitality of public spaces, or yet another big box of gray and asphalt. Zunguze’s glad he works for a city willing to retool new possibilities.

But if strip mall hegemony works against alternate possibilities, strip malls themselves can evoke an array of emotional possibilities, as Titus points out.

“Put on your layperson’s hat, and you say, ‘Boy, they’re ugly.’ Put on an academic’s hat, and you think, ‘Wow, there’s a lot to learn from them.’ If I put on my architect’s hat, I say, ‘Gee, I hope I don’t have to design these the rest of my life.’ If I put on my consumer’s hat, I might say, ‘Wow, I’m glad I’ve got one of these right around the corner.’ Put on a developer’s hat, and you might have dollars signs in your eyes. But if I were a resident, I’d complain about how it was lowering the value of my property.”

In states more densely populated than **Utah**, there’s already a subtle evolution at work that may yet see the strip mall’s demise. As populations continue to boom, a lot of growth moves up rather than out. Even in sprawled-out Southern California, there are harbingers of change. Faced with an exploding population and a growing shortage of developable land, Orange County is looking at developing more than 700 ailing, mid-size strip malls into residential housing.

In some metropolitan areas, strip malls are such a permanent fixture that some advocate turning them into historic districts. That’s exactly what the commercial tenants at Detroit’s Lafayette Towers proposed in January, when the property’s owners talked about closing it down. In Nevada, strip malls are the stuff of emerging political careers. During her re-election campaign last year, Republican Lt. Gov. Lorraine Hunt told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* of how owning her first strip mall helped her cut her teeth for public office. “Tenants came to me with their problems, and I’d say: ‘Did you try this?’ I became active as a small-business advocate.”

Plenty of authorities believe we’ll never get back to Main Street, USA—at least, not until we get rid of our cars. “The reality of such a street will not materialize until people have outgrown their dependence on the automobile and the great desire for privacy and individual gratification it supplies,” warns Ingersoll.

Cox may already be ahead of the trend. “I’m looking at developments where people will be able to live and work in the same building,” he says. “I don’t know how to cut down traffic any more than that.”

All he has to do is find a developer, and a jurisdiction, who will sign on to his design.