

## THE FUTURE OF STRIP MALLS

*Merle Patchett and Rob Shields*

In many neighbourhoods across North America, small, 5-8 store strip malls, once anchors of local retail activity, are increasingly being framed as today's suburban blight. Intended as community hubs of consumption and services, many of these places are being abandoned or becoming underutilized and dilapidated as the services move out of local neighbourhoods in favour of larger-scale malls and shopping districts serving greater catchment areas. At the CRSC, we believe it is time to rethink our relationship with the strip mall. This design competition and touring exhibit proceed from the thesis that the social vitality and community sustainability of mature suburban neighbourhoods can be improved by reviving and re-purposing under-utilized strip malls. It is our contention that small-scale strip malls can play a vital public role in the urbanization of the postwar suburbs. Strip malls can become as important to these communities as the old warehouse and market districts have been to the inner city.

The shopping mall reached its peak - in terms of its ubiquitous presence in the North American urban landscape and popular psyche, as well as the amount of scholarly attention paid to it - towards the end of the twentieth century.<sup>i</sup> Now into the second decade of the twenty first century, local malls, especially small-scale strip malls, are rarely of interest or attachment, undercut in cost by auto-orientated "big box" "power centres" and regional and super regional malls.<sup>ii</sup> Contemporary academic work continues to focus on spectacular, larger-scale, enclosed "mega-" and regional malls,<sup>iii</sup> or on the "mall-ing" of formerly non-consumer spaces, such as airports, universities, office buildings, hospitals and other civic spaces.<sup>iv</sup> There is very little academic literature about small-scale local malls or neighbourhood strip malls beyond urban designers' disparagement of the form.<sup>v</sup> Similarly, policy focus has been on revitalizing heritage<sup>vi</sup> and downtown shopping cores,<sup>vii</sup>

or on creating "town square" versions of power centres (including "lifestyle centres") generally in newly erected suburbs<sup>viii</sup> along with other novel retail spatial configurations.<sup>ix</sup> By contrast, the local strip mall, with a convenience-oriented mission but often not a particularly locally-responsive retail provision, has been in decline: "many of them dying, bleak and waiting for reinvention."<sup>x</sup>

We initiated our design competition - *Strip Appeal* - to "reinvent the strip mall," recognizing its potential to produce innovative solutions and design visions for the rejuvenation of strip mall retail. The specific focus of the competition was smaller scale, neighbourhood shopping plazas consisting of a few retail units, usually fronted by parking, and up to the scale of malls which combine indoor and outdoor sections but remain local in focus and generally do not exceed a single floor. In some cases, these malls have been redeveloped as sub-regional consumption and service destinations by enclosing their storefronts with galleria or glass arcades. However, those malls that have not succeeded in making the transition often stand partially or almost completely empty (see [deadmalls.com](http://deadmalls.com) for countless examples). This problem has been exacerbated by the fact we have overbuilt strip centres and malls in North America. This problem has been exacerbated by the fact we have overbuilt strip centres and malls in North America. The Urban Land Institute details that from 1960-2000, there was almost a tenfold increase of retail space in the United States, from 4 to 38 sq. ft/ person - a rate 5-6 times faster than the increase in sales. This glut has led to 9-10% of retail facilities being derelict, with the most overbuilt category of retail space being the large single-storey discount stores. Following the first quarter of 2011, mall vacancies rose to 9.1 percent. The second quarter was no kinder, with the vacancy rate inching up to 9.3 percent. Strip malls, with a vacancy rate of 10.8 percent, have an even tougher time keeping tenants.

The Urban Land Institute suggests one solution would be to demolish 300 million square feet of retail space. Our research suggests that larger strip malls are more likely to be uneconomic. In general, we observe that the single-storey sections of strip malls have a limited life-span due to ageing roof-top heating and ventilating systems. Two-storey sections are more likely to be repurposed for community uses while the rest of the mall is taken down and the area redeveloped for other purposes. At the CRSC, we recognized this as an opportunity for intervention: how can small-scale strip malls be reinvented and redeveloped to local advantage? As outlined in the previous essay, in order to address the problems associated with strip mall retail, the design competition presented itself as a new model for engaging practitioners and interested publics with the question of how strip malls could be re-imagined to reflect the needs of 21st century suburban communities.

We are unlikely to immediately replace 55+ years of North American car-based suburbs (roughly 1945-2009).<sup>xi</sup> To become more environmentally sustainable, the provision of walkable retail services and accessible centres of social interaction and community facilities has a role to play. Retail is understood as a site that fulfils certain needs at a variety of scales - the need for creating a sense of a vibrant local place, for developing a sustainable hub for community, for the provision of goods and services as local shopping experience and for creating a community retail destination, a "place to go."<sup>xii</sup> It was our hypothesis that the reorientation of the suburban strip mall to community use might contribute to community cohesion by enabling "face-to-face" encounters through the creation of a local "marketplace" or neighbourhood public sphere whilst also adding to a community's economic resilience through informal networks of social interaction.

These facilities are often hampered by being intentionally located at the entrances of arterial roads to suburban housing developments. This makes them ideal automobile commuter stops as they are on the way between work

and home. However, it puts them at the edges of neighbourhoods rather than at their cores, and makes them potentially dangerous destinations for pedestrians and children unless bicycle and walking paths lead to these sites. As a result, many of the entrants include a transportation component in revitalizing the strip mall. Regardless, we see the usages and tenancies of these retail spaces changing from convenience-oriented commercial to educational, fast-food, medical, service, religious, ethnic and other niche services. The strip mall is dead - long live the strip mall!

Factors frustrating redevelopment of strip malls thus far include the accessibility of larger retail facilities, the anti-competitive practices of large retail operators who have acquired ownership of many of these malls (through, for example, increases in rent and restrictive covenants<sup>xiii</sup>) and the decision of property owners to land bank, that is, to hold sites – often unoccupied – as investments to be sold for the value of the land.<sup>xiv</sup> The recent economic climate has also discouraged redevelopment as developers are risk-averse, evidenced by the decrease in the number of applications to rezone these facilities for mixed-use developments. In Canada, municipalities impose re-zoning challenges or vacillate on the requirements for applications that delay and thus increase the cost of repurposing under-performing retail space to other commercial and institutional uses, for example, as office space, often making these projects uneconomic. Despite these trends, some strip malls continue to thrive by successfully servicing the needs of the neighbourhood or by catering to the specialized needs of an identifiable community. There has been little systematic study done to investigate how or why these strip malls have succeeded in their contextual communities.<sup>xv</sup> For the most part, small, vibrant retail clusters such as successful strip malls are regarded as accidents, and any quantitative traffic or marker analyses done surrounding them remain corporate secrets.

A recent study by Linovski,<sup>xvi</sup> although not expressly attempting to identify the reason why some strip malls

succeed and others fail, argues against a blanket push to redevelop strip malls. Recognizing the diversity of strip mall forms - from those characterized by front-loading parking along arterial strips to traditional retail strips that face directly onto the public sidewalk - she argues that design and redevelopment policies should not treat all strip malls as the same. She examines diverse strip mall types in Toronto's postwar suburban fringe facing high redevelopment pressure and identifies certain benefits in leaving some of these strips with fewer controls and barriers to access. Linovski argues that strip malls in these areas provide affordable retail space for small businesses not available elsewhere, enabling diversity in tenants and use. She advances that many of these strip malls have significant social and economic benefits in their current form that are not addressed in most design and planning policies, which tend to judge strip malls based solely on their aesthetic and visual character. She thus urges that future strip mall design policies support functional concerns and not simply respond to visual considerations.

Similarly, Shields' research shows that well-managed malls understand the importance of considering the social needs of communities rather than assuming that a standardized reliance on market projections will guarantee success.<sup>xvii</sup> This means responding to local ethnic interests, holidays and demands. It also means understanding how to manage tensions that arise from different demands of clients, retailers and neighbours. This is why we asked our competition entrants to choose a strip mall local to them. By asking entrants to consider the "situated-ness" of their strip mall sites, we wanted their redesigns to consider the relationship between architectural and non-architectural elements of the site, and to respond to the needs of the surrounding community and built environment. In doing so, the responses demonstrate a wide diversity of approaches to the redesign of small-scale strip malls, from full-site overhauls to lighter-touch, intervention-based approaches only altering one aspect of the site.

This catalogue offers you a glimpse of the future. That is, not projects that are under construction now, but those that

are in the planning phase for 10 to 15 years; hence it will be in 2025, and their successors in 2040 to 2050, when new forms will replace these facilities that were built with a short life span in mind. In total, we received 122 submissions from design students and professionals, creatives and the general public. While the majority of sites were located in North America, selected sites were as far away as the Netherlands, Brazil, Hong Kong, China and Australia. The submissions proposed alternatives from community greenhouses to rooftop recreation spaces and all-weather shelters for food trucks and their patrons. They replace and reinvent what we now know as strip malls. The 20 shortlisted submissions reflect the diversity of responses, approaches and ideas our brief solicited, ranging from architectural responses to structural engineering and facade responses, from urban planning and construction responses to urban transport responses and social and architectural interventions. As argued in the previous essay, the shortlist, as presented in this catalogue and touring exhibition, provides many innovative and implementable "theories of action"<sup>xviii</sup> for the reorientation of strip malls to community futures. As such, we hope the catalogue will follow the example of Tahchieva's Urban Sprawl Repair Kit<sup>xix</sup> and function as a "strip mall repair kit," where the submissions offer implementable techniques for the renovation of existing strip malls to create denser, healthier, more walkable and cohesive communities.

In both the catalogue and the exhibit panels, the submissions have been grouped into five main categories: "Winners," "Green," "Park," "Up and Out" and "Connect." "And Ideas" selections from other entries closes each section. The "Winners" section outlines the Jury Winner and Runner-Up as well as the Public Vote Winner. The Jury Winner - Free Zoning by Stephanie Davidson and Georg Rafailidis - radically re-imagines a derelict strip mall in Buffalo, New York as a building quarry. Proclaiming the site free of zoning restrictions, Davidson and Rafailidis deconstruct and inventory all the building materials on site and demonstrate how these can be used to construct community housing. Using the existing foundation as a seedbed for construction, they show how the plot might develop over time with a wide variety of functions and building typologies, all primarily constructed using the

salvaged materials of the derelict strip mall.

The Jury Runner-Up - Parked Mall by Carole Levesque, Todd Ashton and Aumer Assaf - retains the commercial activity that vibrant neighbourhoods need whilst reducing dependence on passenger vehicles. To do so, it proposes replacing four static strip mall structures in an area of North Edmonton with docking stations where mobile shops can park and offer a range of services. Where previously the strip malls offered a duplication of shops, the mobile shops and service trailers can be arranged in a weekly schedule to offer a wider selection of local services. When not in use, the dock and its infrastructure will be made available to the community for impromptu or organized gatherings.

The Public Vote Winner - Unbox-Embrace-Cohere by Jasper Hilkhuijsen and Geraldine Li - presents 3 steps for turning a semi-vacant strip mall in Enschede, the Netherlands into a community youth centre: 1. Unbox the strip through the removal of non-structural walls to provide new routes through the building. This transforms the building from a single volume into an assembly of volumes. 2. Embrace the surrounding community by facilitating a participatory process from the outset where community members can communicate their ideas and hopes for the site. 3. Cohere spatially and socially. By including the community in the design process from the outset, the task is not only one of modifying a building, it is a collaborative design process whereby the community's needs are expressed in the building's new form.

In the "Green" section, shortlisted submissions show us how we can "green" the strip mall, from community and urban gardening to the introduction of green technologies and materials. For example, Strip Weave by Teal Architects integrates landscape urbanism with high density approaches and environmental design to transform commercial strips into convivial communities powered by wind, sun and geothermal energy. Ferndale Gardens by Paul Samulak proposes to turn a semi-vacant strip mall in Woodward, Detroit into a suburban farm and

restaurant. With the renewal of this site proposed to coincide with the planned Woodward light rail project, Samulak demonstrates how locally grown produce can be distributed to a wider customer base along the planned route.

Underused and unfriendly to the pedestrian, the strip mall parking lot is ripe for transformation. In the "Park" section, submissions redefine the strip mall lot not only as a place to park your car, but as a place that can be pedestrian-friendly and accommodate a variety of other public uses. For example, Pop-Up Food Truck Station by Daniel Orlando Martinez offers a shelter and cafeteria for food trucks and their patrons in a barely used Temple City strip mall parking lot. To encourage patrons from the surrounding area, online networking is employed to notify patrons when different food trucks will be parking. In a variation on this theme, Park-Aid by Ziola Newstudio converts an existing strip mall into a high-density parking garage designed to house all of the surrounding neighbourhood's cars. The pooling of neighbourhood traffic frees up the remainder of the neighbourhood automobile infrastructure – roadways and garages – for future residential densification and green space.

The strip mall building typology is based on principles of maximum efficiency and replicability. By extending this typology, submissions in the "Up and Out" category generate new spatial arrangements, uses and social situations. For example, in Stripscape, designers Dora Baker, Pablo Batista and Natalie Badenduck offer six proposals for retrofitting strip malls around Winnipeg, Manitoba. Rather than tearing down these malls, they propose Stripscaping as a strategy for building upon and around them, specifically the roof structure. In one example, the strip mall roof is fashioned into a year round recre-ational area. By comparison, Cultural Appropriation by Fern Nafziger provides a structural formula by which a strip mall can restructure and grow without imposing on the current businesses which might already be in place.

While many strip malls are located directly adjacent to neighbourhoods, they often remain detached and unrespon-

sive to the community surrounding them. The submissions in "Connect" show how it is possible to reorientate and reconnect the strip mall with its surrounding community and built environment. For example, *Span the Strip* by Toby Keeton proposes bio-bridges to be used as connective pathways to promote greater walkability and reduce the ecological impact of vehicular corridors. In *Combat Concrete* by Natalie Ross, a "Food and Art" program is devised through consultations with the community whereby strip mall parking lots are transformed into areas for food production, recreational park space and art and community activities. *Fix the Strip* by Loretta Foley and Kristin Smith presents a "deciding guide" for any community to find solutions for improving their local strip mall, using its own context and circumstances to shape the process.

Taken together, these designs offer a glimpse of the future of suburban retail experience - where an entire industry is going. More importantly, they suggest a need to change our approach: we must transform strip malls into places that people want to go for services and community events. These designs help eliminate our dependence on the car and contribute to the urbanization and densification of suburbs. Furthermore, rather than depend solely on the investment of risk-averse developers, the shortlisted submissions provide intervention-based strategies that can be implemented by community associations, local entrepreneurs or committed individuals. Collectively then, the submissions provide many innovative and implementable "theories of action" for the renovation and reinvention of existing strip malls to create denser, healthier and more cohesive suburban communities.

<sup>i</sup> M.L. Clausen, "Northgate Regional Shopping Centre - Paradigm for the provinces," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 43(2), 1984, p. 145.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example: T. Hernandez and J. Simmons, "Evolving retail landscapes: power retail in Canada," *Canadian Geographer* 50(4), 2006, pp. 465-486; D. Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl*, NY & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> See M. Abaza, "Shopping malls, consumer culture and the reshaping of public space in Egypt," *Theory Culture Society*, 18(5), 2001, pp.97-122; H. Schmid, "Economy of Fascination: Dubai and Las Vegas as examples of themed urban landscapes," *Erkunde* 60(4), 2006, pp. 346-361; Hélién Klodawsky, *Malls R Us* [documentary film]. Produced

by Ina Fichman (Instinct Films) and Luc Martin-Gousset (Point du Jour), 2009, 78 mins.

<sup>iv</sup> See for example: D. C. Sloan, "Scientific paragon to hospital mall: the evolving design of the hospital, 1885-1994," *Journal of Architectural Education* 48(2), 1994, 82-98.

<sup>v</sup> F. K. Benfield et al., 2001; J. Terris and N. Vorsanger, *Solving Sprawl: models of smart growth in communities across America*. Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2001; E. Dunham-Jones and J. Williamson *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009; S. Zukin, "Reading the urban villager as a cultural document: ethnicity, modernity and capital," *City and Community* 6, 2007, pp. 39-48; S. Zukin, V. Trujillo, P. Frase, D. Jackson, T. Recuber and A. Walker, "New retail capital and neighbourhood change: boutiques and gentrification in New York," *City and Community* 8(1), 2009, pp. 47-64

<sup>vi</sup> J. Goss, "Disquiet on the waterfront: reflections on nostalgia and Utopia in the urban archetypes of festival market places," *Urban Geography* 17(3), 1996, 221.

<sup>vii</sup> T. A. Gibson, "The trope of the organic city: discourses of decay and rebirth in downtown Seattle," *Space and Culture* 6(4) 2003, pp 429-448.

<sup>viii</sup> See for example: M. Southworth, "Reinventing Main Street: from mall to townscape mall," *Journal of Urban Design*, 10(2), 2005, 151-170.

<sup>ix</sup> G. Beck, "Signs of life: a new lesson from Las Vegas - A souped-up shopping centre on the strip uses technology to announce itself as a retail, cultural, and civic destination," *Architectural Record* 191(6), 2003, 199-+.

<sup>x</sup> Southworth, "Reinventing Main Street," p. 153.

<sup>xi</sup> However, we are certainly aware of the longer history of the suburb. See: Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl*.

<sup>xii</sup> R. Jackson and N. Thrift, "Geographies of Consumption," in D. Miller (ed.), *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 204-37.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ziff, B. *Scorched earth: An empirical study of the use of restrictive covenants to stifle competition* [Abstract]. *Planning, Law and Property Rights*; Fifth International Conference. 2011. retrieved from: [http://www.law.ualberta.ca/plpr/2011/PLPR\\_Abstracts.pdf](http://www.law.ualberta.ca/plpr/2011/PLPR_Abstracts.pdf).

<sup>xiv</sup> Interboro Partners, *In the meantime, life with landbanking*. Design Competition entry. 2002. Accessed: <http://www.interboropartners.net/2012/in-the-meantime-life-with-landbanking/>.

<sup>xv</sup> However, see Lo (2009), which shows that supermarkets are complementary consumption sites for Toronto's immigrant Chinese residents but independent ones for non-Chinese; the role of ethnicity/culture is thus important with respect to the embeddedness of immigrant consumers and the cultural representations of certain retail spaces as "ethnic." L. Lo, "The role of ethnicity in the geography of consumption," *Urban Geography* 30(4), 2009, pp. 391-414.

<sup>xvi</sup> O. Linovski, "Beyond Aesthetics: assessing the value of strip mall retail in Toronto," *Journal of Urban Design* 17(1), 2012, pp. 81-99.

<sup>xvii</sup> See, for example: R. Shields, *Life Style Shopping the Subject of Consumption*, London: Routledge, 1992.

<sup>xviii</sup> Bruno Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Towards a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)," *Networks of Design: Proceedings of the 2008 Design History Society*, Falmouth, Cornwall.

<sup>xix</sup> G. Tahchieva, *Urban Sprawl Repair Kit*, Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2010.