

The Shape of Things to Come

If you want to learn about metropolitan areas, a good way is to study retailing trends. Not surprisingly, retail is the industry most in tune with changing demographics, lifestyles and tastes. And what does retail teach us about metro areas these days? The suburban form, as we've known it, is dead.

Make no mistake: The suburbs themselves are doing fine. They are where the vast majority live, they're where most work goes on these days, and they're increasingly developing into centers for the arts and entertainment. But the suburban form - sprawling subdivisions over here, big shopping malls over there, office parks out near the interstate - is fast changing. The form that suburbs are taking looks a lot more like cities these days.

A good place to see this is at regional shopping malls. In general, these are not good times for enclosed malls. A surprising number are going belly up, as people increasingly aim for two kinds of retail experiences: power shopping (where you stock up at Costco or swoop into Best Buy for a must-have 61-inch plasma TV) or lifestyle shopping (where you pick through the olive bar at Whole Foods or shop for jeans at a Benetton store). Enclosed malls, which occupy a middle ground in retailing, are increasingly seen as inconvenient and pricey by power shoppers and oh-so-unfashionable by lifestyle shoppers.

What to do? A common strategy these days is to make malls look more like urban retail districts. Example: **St. Louis'** Mid Rivers Mall, a two-level mall built in St. Charles County in 1987, during the golden years for suburban shopping malls. The mall is planning a major addition, but it won't be anything like what's at the mall today. Rather, it will be a shopping "village," the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported recently, "with the feel of an urban shopping and dining experience."

Gone in this addition is the central idea of enclosed malls: Park in a giant parking lot, walk through the closest door, spend a few hours walking back and forth between Dillard's and Sears, browsing the small stores along the way. The new part of Mid Rivers Mall will allow people to see stores from the street and park nearby. What will draw shoppers from one store to the next won't be large anchor stores; it'll be the street itself. Hence, the Mid Rivers' addition will offer a startling feature at a mall: outdoor sidewalk dining. "This will be something spectacular for St. Louis," an executive at the company that owns the mall told the *Post-Dispatch*. "When we think of lifestyle (shopping), we think of sense of place and an urban setting."

Spectacular? We'll see. But certainly the use of space is nothing new. This is the way urban shopping streets have been laid out since the Middle Ages. The fact that this ancient urban form is coming to the suburbs is further sign that what made the suburbs unique - their use of space - is fast coming to an end.

Footnote: On the very day that the Mid Rivers Mall announced its addition, another enclosed shopping mall announced its closing. But this was no suburban mall; it was St. Louis Centre, an enclosed multilevel mall in downtown St. Louis, opened in 1985 as an attempt to bring the suburban shopping experience to the city. It failed, as have numerous other enclosed downtown malls. Reason: The secret for successful downtown shopping isn't the stores and it certainly isn't air-conditioned comfort, it's the hurly-burly of city streets.

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