



The benefits of adaptive reuse and utilizing buildings year-round - by Haril Pandya

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In the U.S., millions of square feet of interior spaces sit vacant each year. Venues with a singular purpose, such as dorm rooms, conference facilities, sports stadiums, concert arenas, and even some hotel destinations have periods of significant underutilization throughout the year. From strip malls full of vitamin shops and mattress stores, to vacant hospitality venues due to travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, many low-demand, or even abandoned, facilities can be transformed to better provide for the community. According to the Harvard Business Review, the government alone owns an estimated 45,000 underused or underutilized buildings, plus abundant surplus land. And as a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic, many spaces have shut their doors and gone dark. As we look to create a more sustainable future—leveraging the footprint that is already established—designers are exploring how they can give buildings with a singular purpose, multiple uses for year-round occupancy.

Throughout the nation, a variety of singular-use or vacant buildings have been left abandoned due to their location, the economy, or failed business ventures. However, in recent years, we've seen how vacant retail spaces can and continue to be repurposed. In some scenarios, developers have taken over properties, repositioning and rebranding them completely, while others have repurposed the spaces they have to be used in ways that are more conducive to the current environment. In 2017 alone, large anchor chains including JCPenney, Macy's, and Sears announced over 250 store closures. In 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a new wave of bankruptcies emerged, including True Religion, Modell's, and Pier 1 Imports. Depending on the configuration of the existing space, retailers can repurpose these vacancies in a manner that requires minimal disruption to the original infrastructure of the building. Some of the ways retailers are repurposing spaces and adapting to the evolving times include a focus on more centralized healthcare clinics and facilities, as well as the adoption of curb-side pick-up locations for retail, fulfillment centers, and ghost kitchens.

Following closures of big box retailers throughout the pandemic, developers have also looked into the conversion of these larger spaces and how they can transform them into regional fulfillment centers, if the demand is high. The large shift from physical to digital during the pandemic has prompted the need for increased warehouse space, which has been especially true for retailers such as Amazon. Many large malls with empty spaces have even made their properties available for governmental and community organizational use. Some F&B outlets are also shifting to ghost kitchens to keep up with the demand of online orderings, as well as to serve other neighboring communities. Though this particular example might be a temporary fix, they are simple, yet effective uses of empty spaces.

In the healthcare industry, repurposing large dark anchor spaces has become the next round of major investments. Health planners are looking at large anchors as a way to offer a broader array of outpatient clinical services, including urgent care, primary and specialty care, diagnostic imaging, women's health, medical oncology, laboratory services, and even administrative and support services programs. Beyond the current global pandemic, a growing population of aging baby boomers are in critical need of more healthcare facilities. The large number of dark anchor spaces becoming available throughout the country is an opportunity for health systems to get ahead of future demand—potentially at a lower cost.

With many hospitality venues sitting empty due to strict travel bans and restrictions, developers have considered repurposing these locations into assisted living facilities and micro-housing as there are 70-200 keys available to go around. In terms of size perspective, transforming hotels into dorms is another potential alternative for those situated within a short distance from a local college and/or university. The repositioning of these outdated buildings, which were not large revenue-generators otherwise, are an easy place to begin to bring added value back into an area, especially as we continue to navigate challenges posed by COVID-19.

As retail, hospitality, F&B, and healthcare outlets look to reimagine their vacant venues, architecture, design, and strategy firm NELSON Worldwide is pushing the boundaries in repurposing and readapting spaces. A practice that has been familiar to the firm well beyond the pandemic,

NELSON's various offices throughout the nation are propelling businesses forward, while leveraging the existing carbon footprints and making these spaces more accessible, functional, and experientially wonderful year-round.

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