



Exploring business opportunity, adaptive reuse, and community interaction through mixed-use developments - by David Nicholson

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As the new year comes in full swing, we've seen mixed-use developments in New York City continue to rise. Increased interest has come partially as a result of COVID-19, with many traditional office buildings, shopping malls, and other properties becoming vacant, and now being converted for alternative uses. This coincides with a shift in apartment expectations: renters are wanting more consolidated amenities and closer access to grocery and retail stores.

Further, building owners are seeing the appeal of mixed-use, as they navigate this changing landscape. They can be seen as a more stable investment; if one of their businesses, such as a hotel, is not bringing in the desired revenue, then the other businesses they operate, perhaps retail, will carry them through (and vice versa). It's basic supply/demand put into action.

A Jigsaw Analogy

Mixed-use does come with its set of challenges – and understanding how to make the pieces of the puzzle and ultimately put them together are key. When a New York City high-rise has one use, it typically is formulaic; so many have already been done throughout the Big Apple. However, when you try to include two or more uses, be it office/residential, retail/hotel, condo/hotel, and other combination models, it becomes an interesting design challenge to make all of the elements come together – and this is the component I very much enjoy solving for as an architect.

Amongst the biggest design challenges when redeveloping a property into a mixed-use building is finding the synergies between the different uses to create not just a building with multiple facilities or amenities, but rather a property where its uses interact with each other successfully. If tactfully navigated, you're changing people's relationship with and perception of the spaces.

Mapping Out The Strategy: Design Planning

Often the first step in designing these structures involves narrowing down which uses make the most sense for the building owner's revenue goals. From there, we're helping our client visualize what that breakdown in square footage will look like. It's also during this time that we can start thinking about how we will develop the space vertically and what those vertical connections might

net out to, be it elevators or staircases. Once the bones are laid out, we move to the next phase: figuring out which systems should go within the building.

The next set of questions we're faced with – Where will the elevator go? Which floors make the most sense for retail? Can a parking garage be added? – differ when dealing with renovations versus new builds. If we're repurposing an existing structure, its size and floor plates are fixed. Floor plates have a great impact on what can be realistically accomplished on each level; the smallest floor plates typically work best for apartments and ones just slightly larger usually work well for hotel rooms. Though, both of these spaces require ample natural light and ventilation – and thus, plenty of windows. Ensuring these elements are present in the original structure are crucial in determining their use.

When it comes to seeing if a space might work for an alternative use, such as retail, we have to take a close look at the structural elements like columns. The column layout shouldn't be too tight, as it is ideal to have something more open, where customers can more freely travel through the open space. Every aspect of the design ultimately has the user in mind – as an architect, thinking of whoever will be occupying the space remains a core focus. Ultimately, we are curating an experience through the built environment. When there are multiple uses in the space, we have to constantly oscillate our focus on what would be best for the visitor – this is a brain exercise I enjoy, and one that involves ample collaboration amongst builders, business owners, and contractors.

How To Convert

It is typical for older New York buildings to have been built similar to that of a wedding cake, with smaller sections found as you move to the top. In effect, usually hotels or apartments are housed on the higher levels of the building, due to the size of the floorplates. On the lower levels, features such as parking and retail are most optimal – choices that make sense not only from a structural perspective, but also from a usage standpoint. It is only practical to have parking on the ground-level or below, due to street access, and for retail to be on the first few floors because of pedestrian traffic.

Even in cases where a building's guests are not interacting with its multiple uses, the building must have certain elements that blend well together. For example, there are mixed-use buildings where the hotel guests have a dedicated entrance and elevator going up to their rooms, never crossing paths with those in the rest of their building; as the commercial and residential pieces are kept separate for privacy and security purposes. Given the flow of the space is handled differently, by virtue of being a multi-use building, layout considerations have to be proactively addressed, including the synergy between the major elements, such as staircases, security, and fire protocols.

Like a puzzle, mixed-use buildings require a strategic and resilient plan to problem solve and put the pieces together. The key to a successful mixed-use property, whether a new build or conversion, is not only about solving layout issues, but finding the synergies and balance between the uses to attract various groups including residents, consumers, and hotel guests. As developers continue to figure out what to do with older buildings in a time when rentals with amenities nearby are in high

demand – mixed-use conversions will likely continue being a go-to answer.

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