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Artist looks at the re-use of former retail sites

By **Kurt Shaw**

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A onetime Phar-Mor in Parkway Center Mall is home to a bustling flea market. A former Krispy Kreme in Collier Township is a bank.

Change is a fact of life. But what happens when big retailers move out of their big-box shells has been a phenomenon of change that inter-disciplinary artist and researcher Julia Christensen has been worrying about for the last six years.

Studying these monolithic, free-standing structures and their resulting effects on our culture has paid off. Christensen's book, "Big Box Reuse" will be released by MIT Press in November. It features 10 adaptive reuse projects, including The Peddler's Mall, a chain of flea markets that reuse Wal-Mart buildings throughout Kentucky. Inside these massive structures, the display aisles that once held low-cost goods have been replaced with aisles of stalls in a free-market flea-for-all.

"I love the irony of local individuals selling used and antique items in a space built by a faceless, multinational corporation in order to move hundreds of identical items," says Astria Suparak, newly appointed director of the Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University, who is the founding director of the Warehouse Gallery, a contemporary-art gallery overseen by Syracuse University.

For her first exhibition, Suparak chose to exhibit 77 of Christensen's photographs, all of which are featured in the artist's book, as well as a new installation, in an exhibit titled "Your Town, Inc.," which examines how communities are changing in the shadow of an ever-changing corporate real estate market.

The photographs, in particular, illustrate the ways in which communities throughout the United States creatively re-employ the structures constructed and abandoned by multinational corporations, such as Wal-Mart and Kmart.

For example, one photograph features a Kmart in Austin, Minn., that was converted into a 16,500-square-foot Spam Museum in 2001. Today, the museum welcomes nearly 100,000 visitors a year eager to learn about the history of the mystery meat.

Other resulting endeavors include a justice center, megachurch, senior resource center, and an elementary school, many of which, perhaps not so surprisingly, began as Wal-Mart stores.

Christensen says it was the expanding Wal-Mart in her hometown of Bardstown, Ky., a small historic town with more than 300 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, that first grabbed her attention and became the impetus for the six-year project.

"In the town, the Wal-mart has expanded twice," Christensen says. "As they expanded they left two buildings in their wake. The first one was razed to make room for a new courthouse for the county, which I thought was a really peculiar reclamation of space.

"So, at that point I started to look around on the hunch that there were more abandoned Wal-Mart buildings throughout the country. And sure enough, all over the country, communities are using the buildings

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themselves for civic reuse. That got me interested in how this phenomenon is going on."

For "Your Town, Inc." Christensen fabricated a sculptural construction in collaboration with three students at Oberlin College, where she is the Henry R. Luce Visiting Assistant Professor of the Emerging Arts. The structure, titled "UnBox," is a reaction and response to the big-box concept.

On display on the second floor of the gallery, Christensen's UnBox demonstrates values and conventions opposed to the superstore sort.

"I wanted to make something that was the opposite of the big-box building," Christensen says "With big boxes, obviously, the building is not transportable, it's not modular, it's not made of recyclable materials. It's made primarily for one single-use purpose, and that's it. So, I wanted to make something that was transportable, modular and made of locally sourced, recyclable materials that can be used for various uses throughout its existence."

Christensen says the UnBox can be adapted for both creative and social uses, rather than retail purposes, by various groups from Greater Pittsburgh who can propose events to take place within this new facility.

"The installation can enable discussion about urgent issues, such as sustainability, user-friendliness and reusability," she says.

On the floor of the gallery, an actual-sized parking lot has been painted to City of Pittsburgh code. Christensen says the lot raises questions about the infrastructural aspect of our lifestyles.

"It's about the auto-centricity of our culture," she says.

The parking lot piece is an added bonus to an already complete exhibition that, altogether, explores the state of our current built environment in a refreshingly sober way. Allowing the viewer to question not only what our surrounding landscape is, but, more importantly, what it is becoming.

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