

Thinking outside the box

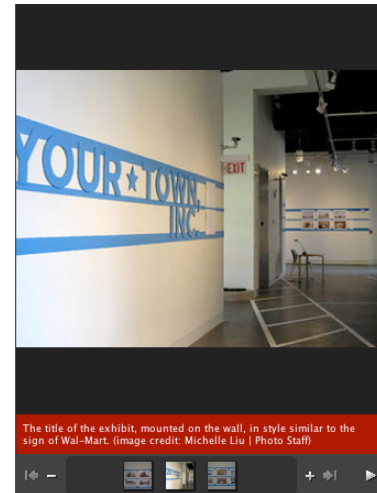
Your Town, Inc. at the Miller Gallery displays the need for eco-friendly construction

PILLBOX | Shweta Suresh

The fate of abandoned Wal-Mart and Kmart buildings no longer remains a mystery.

For the past six years, author, artist and researcher Julia Christensen has been tracking down these old big-box buildings, and now, through her photographs, is able to display what she has found. The collection of her 78 photographs depicting big-box renovations, along with an architectural construction titled “UnBox”, together create the interesting, as well as intriguing, new exhibition at the Miller Gallery: *Your Town, Inc.*

“I grew up in a small town in central Kentucky called Bardstown,” said Christensen on how she got started on this project. “Wal-Mart has expanded twice in Bardstown, leaving two empty buildings behind. The first one was eventually razed and the site was used for the new county courthouse. I started looking around at how other communities are dealing with abandoned big-box space on a hunch that this was an increasingly typical situation in towns. And sure enough, I found many reuses of abandoned big-box buildings, and I started traveling to them and documenting how this is going on throughout the country.”



The title of the exhibit, mounted on the wall, in style similar to the sign of Wal-Mart. (image credit: Michelle Liu | Photo Staff)

The communities to which these abandoned big-box buildings belong have acted cohesively to renovate them. In some cases, the renovations have produced practical outcomes, as in the case of Hastings, Neb., and Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., where the buildings were converted into an early childhood center and senior resource center, respectively. In some other cases, the renovations have been more surprising. These include the construction of a flea market, an indoor raceway, and a Spam museum.

Through her pictures, Christensen seems to be questioning the effects that corporate real estate is having on our culture. These gigantic structures seem to dominate not only over their land, but also the surrounding areas. According to Christensen, one of the ill effects of these corporations is their hold over the land, even after they are gone.

“Wal-Mart, for instance, is one of the largest landowners in this country, and they maintain a lot of control over the future of the land that they own now. Sometimes when they sell land, the deeds for their land include stipulations on what it can be used for, sometimes for up to 100 years in the future,” she wrote in an e-mail. “Also, the infrastructure around these buildings is corporation-specific, so Wal-Mart (or Kmart or Best Buy, etc.) will determine the flow of the roads, and when they move out of the building, the infrastructure of their design remains. In short: these buildings have a much longer-lasting and powerful effect on our cities and towns that one would think at first glance.”

In light of the ill effects these big-box structures are producing, Christensen decided to construct a structure that was characterized by principles that opposed those of the corporate constructions. With this idea, the “UnBox” was born.

“In creating the ‘UnBox,’ I wanted to build something that is ‘opposite’ of a big-box building. Big boxes are generally not transportable, built for one use only, not modular, and not built of anything local or recyclable,” Christensen wrote. The “UnBox”, on the other hand, possesses various features that are directly in contrast to the characteristics of big-box structures.

For instance, the “UnBox” is portable. It can be folded up into a box of size 3 x 6 x 9 feet and transported to

different places. This is in direct disagreement with the big-box structures, as they can be removed only if they are razed to the ground. The “UnBox” is also eco-friendly, as it is made entirely out of recyclable materials. Construction materials that were used to build it were all obtained locally. Christensen wrote, “We never stepped foot into a big-box building in order to build the “UnBox,” relying on local hardware stores and local businesses and craftspeople for materials. We transported it from Oberlin, Ohio to Pittsburgh in a truck that runs on vegetable oil from local restaurants.” The “UnBox” also stands apart because it is modular

— possessing shelves, an awning that can fold out for different uses, and a tunnel, among other things — and, unlike the big-box structures, serves many purposes. Christensen hopes that the “UnBox” will be used as a location for people to gather within, to conduct discussions about sustainability and public space.

Another interesting feature about the exhibit is that the “UnBox” is set up over a re-created parking lot, complete with white paint lines demarcating the parking areas and a strip of pavement covered with fake green grass. Astria Suparak, director of the Miller Gallery and curator of this exhibit, explained the link between big box buildings and parking lots.

“Big-box stores are completely dependent upon car culture. You can’t really walk or bike to them. The defining big-box experience for me is the bloated moat of pavement surrounding each monolithic store, separating it from the street and killing the ambiance of a walkable city,” Suparak said.

The exhibition as a whole encourages the audience to re-evaluate how they view their community space, and whether they look upon the permanent existence of big-box buildings as an infringement of this space or a practical use of it. Through the concept of the “UnBox,” the artist strongly suggests that we can actively substitute corporations with local businesses, resulting in the strengthening of our community. Suparak strongly believes that the message of the “UnBox” has the potential to defeat big-box culture.

“More and more counties are creating laws restricting the construction of big-box buildings, and/or creating incentives for small businesses.... I’ve seen how walkable cities, with minimal surface parking lots and reliable and frequent public transportation, increase social opportunities, responsibilities, desirable atmospheres, and creative commerce,” she said.

The exhibition is on display at the Miller Gallery through Nov. 23.

A special “Hometown BBQ” reception will be held Sept. 19 from 6 to 8 p.m.

A visit from the artist is also scheduled during the Carnegie Mellon University Lecture Series. Christensen will present her book, *Big Box Reuse*, as well as hold a book signing, Nov. 3 from 4:30 to 6 p.m. The book, to be published in November by the MIT Press, features the photos from the Miller Gallery exhibit.