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Towns recycle abandoned stores

By [Haya El Nasser](#), USA TODAY

Wisconsin Rapids, one of Wisconsin's old paper-mill towns, had never fought to keep Wal-Marts and other big-box retailers out. Quite the opposite. The city was so welcoming that it got a state grant to meet Wal-Mart's parking needs in the 1980s. By the late 1990s, however, Wal-Mart outgrew the space and moved to the outskirts of town. Downtown Wisconsin Rapids was left with a 120,000-square-foot shell and a giant parking lot. A neighboring shopping center suffered.

The Centralia Center, converted from an old Wal-Mart store, in Wisconsin Rapids, now houses the Lowell Center for senior activities and dining. Wal-Mart now operates a supercenter on the other side of the town.

By Tom Loucks, Wausau Daily Herald



Today, the old Wal-Mart has new life as the Centralia Center for senior citizens. "Had we not (done so) ... today it would still be sitting there blighted," says Mayor Mary Jo Carson.

America's big-box experience is entering a new phase. Some towns continue to block megastores because they object to their economic impact on local merchants and the traffic congestion they can create. But thousands of other towns across the USA that welcomed them face a growing challenge: What to do with the cavernous spaces left behind by retailers such as Home Depot, Wal-Mart and Kmart when they downsize or expand elsewhere.

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Big-box stores leave huge spaces behind — many carry deed restrictions that prevent other retailers from moving in — and filling the space can be difficult. So cities have become creative and some are turning these hubs of capitalism into centers of civic life.

A Kmart in Hastings, Neb., is a Head Start Early Childhood Center. Kmart's in Buffalo and Charlotte and a Wal-Mart in Laramie, Wyo., are charter schools. After Hurricane Katrina's devastation in Louisiana, the St. Bernard Health Center opened in government trailers in the parking lot of a closed Wal-Mart.

Among the most unusual uses: An old Kmart in Austin, Minn., is the site of Hormel Foods offices and a museum dedicated to Hormel's famed meat product, Spam; the Peddlers Mall in Nicholasville, Ky., is a flea market and antiques mall where a Wal-Mart once was.



Profiting from abandoned spaces

Julia Christensen spent six years documenting the trend in *Big Box Reuse*, a book to be published in November. She details how 10 communities turned vacant big-box stores into schools, a courthouse, church, museum and other civic organizations. "We have a bunch of empty buildings all over the country," says Christensen, an artist who teaches at Oberlin College in Ohio.

Most cities don't know what other cities are doing with abandoned big-box spaces, she says.

"I hope this project will give us a platform so that we can make informed decisions," Christensen says. An exhibit of Christensen's photos that appear in the book opens this week at the Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. "Hopefully, we can raise awareness," she says.

Wal-Mart owns more than 3,400 stores among its Supercenter versions, Sam's Clubs and others, says Jennifer Evans-Cowley, a city and regional planning professor at Ohio State University who has written about how communities can prepare for the short life span of mammoth stores.

"Every year, Wal-Mart closes stores," she says. "There are 15 major retailers. Multiply that by 2,000 stores each with a 20- to 25-year life cycle. It's not unreasonable to expect that closure would happen during that time."

Cities adopt new standards

More communities are introducing policies that require big-box retailers to help redevelop the spaces they leave behind. Some require them to tear down the stores if they're empty more than a year. Others have introduced design standards that require landscaping and more than one main entrance so that the building can accommodate multiple tenants in the future.

A retailer the size of Wal-Mart can make or break a town like Wisconsin Rapids, which has about 18,000 residents. "It changed us," Wisconsin Rapids Mayor Carson says of Wal-Mart's decision to leave downtown and build a superstore on the edge of town. The move eventually helped, she says.

"We, as a city, now have a central location for our seniors that's better than having it on the outskirts of town," Carson says.

About 20,000 square feet of the old store were knocked down to make way for a community garden and benches. Inside, seniors now enjoy a library, meeting rooms, a walking track, pool tables and state-of-the-art kitchen and computer center. The center also holds aging and disability centers for two counties.

"Local officials today have to be problem-solvers to survive," Carson says. "It might help local public officials to think as far out of the box as they can."