

friday, august 29, 2008

ReBoxed: Finding God in a Wal-Mart

Are they ever going to do anything with that Giant Eagle on Center in North Oakland?



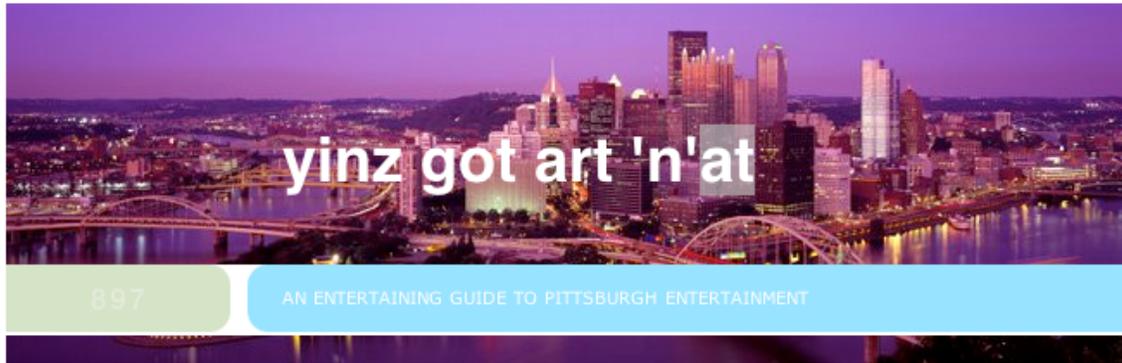
Closed for more than two years, the Giant Eagle on the corner of Center Avenue and N. Craig Street is now an empty parking lot and an abandoned grocery store, fondly remembered (by my friends and I, at least) as the Dirty Bird.

It's now an all too familiar part of the American landscape: the vacant "box" store and its empty parking lot. Failed business adventures and abandoned buildings are nothing new to the American landscape, but the trend starting in the sixties towards isolated business with their own blocks – or in the case of Wal-Mart, nearly zip codes – and strip malls that stand alone in a community is leaving a new and confusing geography for the country as huge retailers like K-Mart downsize or, in the case of Wal-Mart, simply abandon their original locations in some towns to build their supercenters sometimes less than a mile away.

Julia Christensen has spent the last six years studying the landscape phenomenon what she calls "Big Box" buildings. She's documented several huge terrains that once used to be meccas of American consumerisms that, now, either stand on relics for a country that demands newness or, preferably, find new and sometimes ironic ways of living on. Several of her findings are now on an exhibit at the Miller Gallery on Carnegie Mellon's campus.

In city of Pittsburgh alone there are several of these spots like the dirty bird and the recently closed Taco Bell on Baum Blvd. Both of these locations are only a few blocks away from a Chipotle which is building a new structure where Duke's Bar once was, on the corner of Milvale Avenue and Baum. Once you get into the suburbs the symptoms are worse: whole shopping complexes, even malls, have shut down, leaving colossal concrete covered areas unused.

The plague of these eyesores isn't unique to the Steel City; Christensen's project—*Big Box Reuse*—tracks the problem everywhere from Lebanon, Mo. to Pinellas Park, Fla. All across America, the landscape is filling up with commercial ghost towns. But what Christensen has found is that some cities and communities are finding ways to recycle and reuse these big boxes.



Part art piece, part social commentary, part call to action, *Your Town, Inc.* focuses on creative ways some of the Big Boxes are being refilled and reused.

From new stores, libraries, senior centers, health clinic and even Chapels—That's right! One of the most impressive pictures in Christensen's collection is of a blue sign that clearly used to bear the words Wal-Mart, which has been painted over with the message: Future Home of Calvary Chapel —ideas abound for these abandoned marvels of modernity.

On an artistic scale, *Your Town, Inc.* is fairly minimal and without reading any of the plaques or supplementary material it's pretty hard to guide yourself through the gallery space and figure out what's going on. But once you realize that the old Wal-Mart in Pinellas Park is now a mega-Church chapel you'll get the picture. Another great photo from that series also shows that the parking lot is just as full (if not more packed) that what you'd expect outside your Wal-Mart. Another odd encounter is a converted K-Mart which now houses the town's library in Lebanon, Mo.



Christensen has not brought the concept into a gallery space to claim some auteurship over noticing these trends that have been taking place over the country. The art for her comes when the social dynamic get into play. Turning these Big Boxes into new additions that benefit the community is where the real creativity of the project. *Big Box Reused* is meant to be a think-piece which ignites ideas and engages communities into a call for creative changes across the country.

Maybe, somebody will do something about the old Dirty Bird after all.

posted by jacob spears at 8:33 pm

1 comments:

missouriagent said...

When I first heard the idea to turn the old KMart building into our new local library, I thought the idea crazy! The renovation is now done, complete with cafe and Route 66 museum. Wonderfully done - an awesome use of the space. Bright lights, landscaping and vivid signage make it complete. While it brings in very little sales tax revenue, we do not have a "big ugly box" standing empty on our main drag.

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