
CONCEPT PLAN

Recalibrating
shopping centers for
21st century **learning,**
working, living &
connecting



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OVERVIEW

Across the country, shopping centers are faced with high vacancy rates and millions of square feet of empty space. This is just one of many indicators that we are in the midst of a dramatic economic transformation. Driven by the exponential growth in technology, a new virtual landscape has emerged which is reshaping all aspects of human life and redefining the needs of 21st-century communities.

While virtual platforms can reach large audiences at lower costs, they still do not satisfy our fundamental human need to be physically and meaningfully engaged with one another. They have also exacerbated feelings of isolation created by the 20th-century shift from community-centered interactions to segmented places of work, school, and home. Now, the 2020 pandemic has made isolation a common reality. Within this dynamic, shopping centers have an opportunity to be recalibrated as places where virtual communities are anchored in physical spaces to create a new type of town center.

In recent years, personal consumption expenditures on experiences have grown 4 times faster than goods. Integrating financially secure technology platforms into vacant retail space will not only stabilize the shopping center's balance sheet, but it will fulfill the human need for connection while generating foot traffic to support the remaining retail and restaurant tenants.

THIS CONCEPT PLAN PROPOSES FOUR SELF-SUSTAINING COMPONENTS:

CO-LEARNING & UPSKILLING CENTERS

Co-learning and Upskilling Centers answer the need for continual upskilling required to keep pace with technology in both our personal and professional lives. Additionally, they respond to the unmet demand for new types of technology-related skills, requiring short-term certification, that our current education models continue to be unable to address. The need, as well as the desire, to continuously acquire knowledge and be with others is not limited to one age group or demographic which offers a broad market reach.

CO-WORKING SPACES

Co-Working Spaces address the changing character of the workforce as well as the workplace. Whether a full-time employee or a freelancer, digital platforms have freed workers to work anywhere. Although most people enjoy working from home part of the time, the majority want engagement with colleagues and other professionals for some portion of their week. The pandemic has made many companies rethink the need for large office spaces further fueling the demand for co-working spaces.

INTERACTIVE/SHARED HOUSING

Interactive/Shared Housing offers the opportunity to meet new people while learning or working remotely. Shared kitchens and other spaces for social collaboration are what differentiate this housing from traditional independent living spaces. Potential operators could be online universities or travel companies leveraging the global reach of all the components.

MEMBERSHIP CLUBS/COMMUNITY SPACES

Membership Clubs provide places for meaningful engagement around shared interests and activities. They would reflect the local culture and target 21st-century activities such as eSports, TED talks, GitHub, Pinterest, urban gardening, and other social pursuits. These can be run using a health club-type business model (different levels of membership) or offered as perks for the users of the other spaces.



LEARNING

CO-LEARNING & UPSKILLING CENTERS

Built for a different era, our current systems of education do not have the agility needed for today's economy. The Council of Foreign Relations report titled [The Work Ahead](#) estimates that "the number of U.S. jobs requiring high levels of digital skills has more than quadrupled already" and "the lack of accessible educational opportunities that are clearly and transparently linked to the changing demands of the job market is a significant obstacle to improving work outcomes for Americans."

This point was echoed by the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#), the world's largest business organization with over three million members. Their surveys show that while 98% of colleges believe they are preparing students for the job market, only 11% of business owners agree. As a result, they have partnered with community colleges to develop their own [Talent Pipeline Program](#) to improve student readiness. The huge gap in skills demanded by the workplace--especially in technology and healthcare--has given rise to new education and training models.

[Google](#), [IBM](#), [Unity](#), [AT&T](#), and [AWS](#) are among the many companies that are either partnering with existing virtual platforms or creating their own short-term certifications to satisfy the demand for needed skills. Much of this work is in "new collar" jobs like cybersecurity, data science, AI, blockchain, virtual reality, medical technology, and cloud computing. With hackers penetrating every type of online system from personal to governmental, there are [3 million unfilled jobs](#) in cybersecurity alone.

WE NO LONGER LIVE A THREE-PART LIFE WITH EDUCATION BEFORE 25, WORK UNTIL 65, THEN RETIREMENT.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND CONTINUAL UPSKILLING ARE REQUIRED TO ADAPT TO THE PACE OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE--FOR EVERY AGE GROUP FROM TEENS TO OLDER ADULTS.

Boot camps, university-related continuing education programs, online education platforms, and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are evolving as powerhouses to satisfy the demand for not only skill development but also the pursuit of personal interests. Since they were introduced in 2012, MOOCs, like [Udacity](#), [Coursera](#), and [edX](#), have grown to [110 million global students](#) offering 820 skill-based certificates and 50 university degrees. Six online education start-ups have already received \$billion "unicorn" valuation status.



OUR FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED TO CONNECT OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE INTERACTION AROUND PROJECTS, IDEAS AND INTERESTS.

Companies like [General Assembly](#) and [All Allied Health Schools](#) are providing much-needed training for workers in technology and healthcare. New types of global online universities like [Minerva](#) and Western Governors University ([WGU](#)) are also stepping up to define a new generation of higher education.

Another opportunity lies in shifting Career and Technical Education ([CTE](#)) programs to shopping center locations. They have been confined to public high schools, limiting access to a broader array of students from different types of schools (private, charter, homeschool) as well as levels of education (middle school to community college). Even more importantly, practitioners rather than overburdened teachers need to lead the programs to keep pace with the changing workplace.

Since the platforms themselves provide content and expertise, physical engagement spaces could be led by teacher assistant-types of staff or facilitators that encourage peer-to-peer learning and collaboration. This vital human infrastructure can inspire engagement around projects, ideas, and interests.

- This concept plan can be applied anywhere from redevelopment districts to high-end communities.
- Virtual learning, working and shopping platforms have reduced the demand for centralized and single-use physical spaces.
- With available space and centralized locations, shopping centers are ideally suited to respond to the needs of a new generation.



WORKING CO-WORKING SPACES

Even before the pandemic drove companies to re-think large office spaces, co-working spaces were exploding. The shift towards project-based work and the freedom afforded by mobile applications has flattened out corporate structures. It has also fueled the rise of skill-specific freelancers. Most workers would like to interact with others while also having flexibility when and where they work.

Companies like the UN's Impact Hub and WeWork have been especially successful because of their focus on community connectedness and interaction. They also offer international exposure that could be leveraged to draw the global community to the co-learning, residential, and membership components.



LIVING INTERACTIVE RESIDENTIAL HOUSING

As students and workers become less tied to a specific location, they have opportunities to travel and experience different geographic areas. For students, young adults without children, and empty nesters, this can be particularly appealing and creates demand for short-term housing that promises human interaction.

This new residential housing would offer large shared community kitchen areas and collaboration/maker spaces. This component could be run as a large Airbnb-type complex or as a longer-term residential partnership with a developer, education organization, or company. The global reach of the co-working and co-learning partners could be leveraged to broaden the market.



CONNECTING MEMBERSHIP CLUBS/SOCIAL SPACES

Opportunities for meaningful engagement with others around interests and activities could add another layer of energy to the already interconnected components. As the work of renowned psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl showed, the search for meaning is fundamental to a fulfilling life. It is found through our experiences, activities, and engagements with others beyond ourselves.

An added benefit is that interaction between all members of a community has been shown to be beneficial to mental health and wellness. According to the World Health Organization:

On the one hand, millions of dollars are committed to alleviating ill-health through individual intervention. Meanwhile, we ignore what our everyday experience tells us, i.e. the way we organize our society, the extent to which we encourage interaction among the citizenry and the degree to which we trust and associate with each other in caring communities is probably the most important determinant of our health.

Finally, this generates opportunities for places where new friendships can be formed; where singles can meet and get to know each other; and where all ages, races, and creeds can mix together around shared ideas and interests.

POTENTIAL IDEAS INCLUDE:

- A dedicated TED space where either video or in-person presentations could occur followed by community discussion.
- Urban gardening/permaculture active learning and cultivating spaces could happen on the rooftops.
- An eSport space could be built in for video gaming competitions.
- An Etsy or Pinterest-hub could offer QVC-type of presentations or craft classes.
- Sponsored cooking demonstrations, classes, and competitions.
- Makerspaces where GitHub or other crowdsourcing collaboration could happen.
- Dedicated area for mom's groups to offer support and connection while children are in free-range play areas (perhaps monitored by the elderly), physical climbing spaces, or coding classes.
- Virtual reality travel experiences with world-class museums.
- Any other cultural interest that is reflective of the community.

BY RECALIBRATING SHOPPING CENTERS FOR 21ST-CENTURY LIFE, WE WILL CREATE ENVIRONMENTS THAT FACILITATE MUCH-NEEDED HUMAN INTERACTION, EMPOWER CULTURAL CHANGE, AND PROMOTE ECONOMIC PROSPERITY FOR ALL.