Laborare, Vivere, et Ludere

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ABSTRACT

Abandoned: Shopping malls' definition in 2021. Once a magnificent symbol of suburban sprawl, now left in crumbles to die. This thesis project aims to make the mall relevant to people's lives by repurposing its buildings as part of a mixed-use complex. Beginning with a study of the shopping mall's history and New Urbanism concepts, I propose that a mall is not just a public place for gathering, sharing experiences, and building memories but also a reflection of a neighborhood's identity.

INDEX WORDS: Malls, Death, Abandoned, Architecture, Community, Memory, Gathering, Identity, New urbanism, Repurpose, Refunction.
LABORARE, VIVERE, ET LUDERE

By

NATHALIA ARRUDA SILVA

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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LABORARE, VIVERE ET LUDERE

by

NATHALIA ARRUDA SILVA

Committee Chair: Ryan Henderson Crooks
Committee: Catherine Trugman
Dr. S. Dawn Haynie

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DEDICATION

First of all, for God, that allowed me to follow my dreams.

My beloved husband always supports and encourages me throughout all my journey in this new country.

My family in Brazil, even with the distance, are always present and thoughtful.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to show my appreciation to my professors and architectural colleagues, Ryan Henderson Crooks, Catherine Trugman, and Dr. S. Dawn Haynie, who provided me guidance through my thesis process. Your experience and knowledge had great value in my academic and professional life.

Also, I want to show my appreciation to the Ernest G. Welch - School of Art and Design faculty and staff, who allowed me to be part of a beautiful institution. Lastly, to my husband and family, who have always believed in me.
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A MALL IS BORN

1.1. Suburbia: U.S. Reality

Having lived through World War II and the Great Depression, anxiety defined most Americans' moods in the 1950s. During this period, industrialization and more efficient importing and exporting made consumer goods cheaper and more accessible to all Americans. Americans and their families took advantage of lower-priced mass-manufactured products. Loan programs administered by the Federal Housing Administration (F.H.A.) and the Veteran's Administration (V.A.) aimed at constructing new single-family houses in the suburbs, helping more Americans than ever realize the American Dream (Figure 1). In addition to these programs, a Highway Interstate Program funded through local and federal incentives connected the new suburbs. With more affordable car prices, the new roads facilitated commuting between work in cities and homes in the suburbs.

Figure 1: General Electric Housing Program advertisement. Image courtesy State Museum of Pennsylvania.
The housing just the beginning. As residential areas in the suburbs started to flourish, new construction with diverse uses also began to grow. The new suburb-adjacent buildings, which contained businesses, shops, and offices, coupled with the lack of industry regulations and infrastructure, caused the cities to become ugly, congested, dirty, and unsafe. Influenced by the new reality, the City Beautiful movement and the urbanist ideal emerged in 1893, proposing zoning laws that separated businesses and buildings in different areas of cities and surrounding suburbs. In this way, once again, suburbs and towns could be reorganized. In addition to the impact of the housing programs and the City Beautiful movement, the U.S. began expanding its highway system in the mid-1950s. In their book, Suburban Nation, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck divide sprawl into five components: house subdivisions, shopping centers, office parks, civic institutions, and roadways. Each one of these categories represents one exclusive zoning use and can be classified and defined as:

a. House Subdivisions, clusters, or pods. Defined by residential use and divided into neighborhoods or village-towns, these areas' names are often in tribute to natural features destroyed in their construction.

b. Shopping centers, strip centers, or big boxes. Concentrated commercial retail use, initially located near to the highways, these places distinguished by one-story height and huge parking lots.

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c. Offices and business parks. These constructions are similar to shopping centers in that they, too, have a boxy shape, large parking areas, and highway proximity. The use, however, is mainly for corporations and businesses to carry out administrative work.

d. Civic institutions. Different from the other uses, these do not frequently appear in suburban spaces. When civic institutions do occur in suburban areas, personal transportation is usually required to reach them. Museums, government buildings, schools, and churches are some examples of this type of use.

e. Roadways. Responsible for connecting people and places. These are traffic generators and populated by cars.

These suburban categories combine to form a hierarchy of malls, parking lots, fast food restaurants, apartment complexes, and cul-de-sac neighborhoods, all connected by busy streets and highways. Even if these places are close by, a car is still necessary for the suburban inhabitants to access goods and services due to the physical (walls and roads), legal (laws), and regulatory (property line) barriers dividing properties.

As suburbs grew, so did problems associate with them. New proposals started to appear as alternatives to uncontrolled suburban sprawl, such as Peter Calthorpe's² "Pedestrian Pockets" or "Transit-Oriented Developments" and Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk's³ : Neo-Traditional Town Planning" or "Traditional Neighborhood Design" (T.N.D.). Those later condensed into New Urbanism, an ideology that aims to return to the European style of settlement.

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³ Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck, Suburban Nation
With human-scale as its core, New Urbanism brings back the ancient Roman concept *Laborare, vivere et ludere*, meaning that a person could work (*laborare*), live (*vivere*), and play (*ludere*) all in the same place. New Urbanists also describe it in ten characteristics: walkability, connectivity, mixed-use and diversity, mixed housing, quality architecture, urban design, traditional neighborhood structure, increased density, smart transportation, sustainability, and quality of life. Regarding its application, according to *The Congress of New Urbanism*, the concept can be used for development, urban infill, preservation, and revitalization.

This thesis will focus on the concepts of revitalization and preservation. Through these, architecture abandoned by uncontrolled sprawl might be repurposed and reorganized. How New Urbanism can revive old buildings like shopping malls is the subject of the next sections.

### 1.2. Understanding the mall

Was the American shopping mall love at first sight? If so, what happened? To understand the mall's downfall, we must study how the mall was born and designed.

The American population was racially and geographically segregated during the Post-World War II period. During this time, white people moved away from downtown areas, mostly occupied by African Americans, to suburbs or metropolitan areas. According to Lorenza Pavesi,\(^4\) wealthy white people in these new areas did not want commercial streets in their new suburban landscape.

---

Soon after he arrived in America in 1938, part of the flood of talented refugees fleeing Nazi Europe, the Vienna-trained architect Victor Gruen (1903–80) made a name for himself as the designer of eye-catching city stores that combined European modernism with a flamboyant American futurism. When Americans moved to the suburbs after World War II, Gruen became a designer of shopping centers and, increasingly, a widely quoted prophet on the suburban future.

While Gruen reveled in America's exuberance and freedom, according to M. Jeffrey Hardwick’s new biography, Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream, he retained a taste for European-style urbanism. The planned shopping center, carefully isolated from the vulgar shopping strips that lined suburban roads, would “fill the vacuum created by the absence of social, cultural, and civic crystallization points in our vast suburban areas,” Gruen said. His design for the nation’s first enclosed shopping mall, Southdale, in the Minneapolis suburb of Edina, called for adjacent houses, apartments, and schools, along with a park and medical center. When the mall opened in October 1956, Time hailed it as a “pleasure-dome-with-parking,” but Gruen’s larger plan for the site was never realized.

After many more commercial successes, Gruen moved back to his beloved Vienna in 1968. By then, he was among the harshest critics of the American suburb. The shopping mall, he complained, had been stripped of all its social promise in developers’ ruthless quest for profits. As for his own creations, he said, “I refuse to pay alimony for those bastard developments.”

Last year, the trade magazine Retail Traffic devoted an entire issue to the future of the shopping mall. In 2013, the magazine predicted, the American shopping center will function like “an old-fashioned Main Street.” “Consumers will be able to visit a grocery or a post office, keep appointments with doctors and dentists, relax with a workout or a facial, take in a movie, enjoy a gourmet meal, or hang out with neighbors at an outdoor concert. If this vision of the future seems familiar, that’s because architect Victor Gruen, the father of the enclosed mall, painted it 50 years ago.”

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Figure 2: The Father of the Mall. Consumer Society. "Inside the Machine." The Wilson Quarterly (1976-) 28,

In this context arose Victor Gruen, an Austrian-born architect known by Paco Underhill\(^5\) as "The Father of the Mall" (Figure 2). Inspired by modern European architecture, mostly in Vienna and Paris, Gruen proposed a mall prototype that, like a "big box," contained a central plaza or piazza surrounded by storefronts and activities. One of his most famous projects was the Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, which opened in 1956 (Figure 3 and 4).

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**Figure 3:** Victor Gruen, Diagram of the Southdale Shopping Mall (1956). University of Wyoming American Heritage Center, Victor Gruen Papers.

**Figure 4:** Victor Gruen, Southdale Shopping Center (1956). Image Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.
Interestingly, the first malls were not enclosed. Instead, they had central hubs, where activities could take place in the open air. Due to the severe weather in Minnesota, however, an open-air plaza was not a viable choice for the Southdale project; as a solution, Gruen proposed a temperature-controlled indoor space. These and other characteristics made Southdale a national model for other new malls. According to Augustine Dine\(^6\), geometry, organization, and balance were three elements always recognized in Gruen's projects: "Among Gruen's strengths, he could transfer theory in practice."

Gruen built a sense of intimacy by using rectangular geometry. Particularly in Southdale Center, rectangular geometry is evident in both the mall's settlement on a rectangular parcel of land and his floor plan. Even with no standard store size, the shape of a rectangle is always present in his designs.

Spatial organization and balance were also essential characteristics of Gruen's projects. As a disciple of Modern Architecture, Gruen focused his floor plan development on the space function. He divided malls into two types of stores: standards and anchors. These standards and anchors were strategically placed to surround the piazza, a central open area with the highest concentration of people. Together with corridors for circulation, the piazza increased the number of times people could stand and stare at a glass store façade, eventually becoming "enchanted" and inspired to purchase and consume more goods. The anchors are the final piece of the mall's layout. At Southdale, Gruen placed two large anchor stores, Donaldsons and Dayton's, in opposite corners, lending equilibrium to his plans.

Finally, there is a structure. Gruen placed a series of equally-spaced columns to create a grid pattern that made the mall's construction more manageable and faster than other types of building projects in that period. However, the architect was not just concerned with the building's internal organization but also with the exterior. Contradicting the pedestrian-friendly walkability inside the mall, Gruen proposed a vast parking lot to serve one of the critical suburban figures: the automobile.

Gruen developed a prototype endlessly replicated through his ground-breaking design and (most importantly) created an enduring symbol of suburbia.

1.3. Retail Management

How do malls work? It seems easy: you drive to the mall, park the car, stare at the storefronts, purchase goods, and drive home. However, the mall is more than the simple act of going to a place and buying something. Beyond the shops, merchandise, restaurants, and shop workers, something else makes the "strip center" attractive to the public. Underhill\(^7\) observes, "...by studying the shopping mall and what goes in there, we can learn quite a bit about ourselves from a variety of perspectives...." Besides, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk\(^8\) state that a consumer's desire to buy things was not a result of aleatory feelings but rather a direct result of techniques. Examples include centralized management, joint propaganda, merchandising, anchors, the strategic relationship of anchors and parking, proactive leasing and retail mix, dimensions, retail continuity, and incubators.

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\(^7\) Underhill, “Inside the Machine,” page30.

Malls were always seeking shoppers, so it was not by random chance that developers began building malls closer to suburbia. But the location was not the developers' only concern; for a mall project to become a reality, a lot of information has to be analyzed to decide where and why to construct a mall. Central management offices conduct detailed studies and collect data about real estate, architectural details (e.g., storefront, landscape), and operational decisions (e.g., hours of operation, maintenance) to make sure a mall succeeds.

In addition to all these technical decisions, an atmosphere or "pseudo-place," as Jon Goss calls it, has to be created to attract customers to the malls. In his essay called "The Magic of the Mall," Goss states: "Developers have sought to assuage this collective guilt over conspicuous consumption by designing into the retail built environment the means for a fantasized dissociation from the act of shopping."

Characterized by a confusing explosion of visual communication—advertisements, store logos, location maps, and more—the mall must help its users feel safe and well-guided at the same time. While looking for something specific in a mall, the user feels forced to take a path from store to store until reaching the final destination, the anchor stores near the parking lots. The types and placement of retail stores within a mall is not an arbitrary decision. Each spot is carefully studied to determine what kind of store would best enhance the mall's diversity and activity. Circulation is not just part of the mall atmosphere but also a strategy to force buyers to walk long distances past small stores in a central area. As Duany and Plater-Zyberk, state, a mall's corridors should be less than fifty feet wide and less than one mile long. These dimensions

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allow users to walk without using a car and to have clear visibility of stores. Furthermore, mall corridors present continuity in design, with an anchor store placed at each end.

A mall is not just construction, but rather each store undertakes a collaborative effort to serve a community of people. Like Paco Underhill\textsuperscript{11} states, "a lot of a community's life in its mall" and "we organize our world in part around the function of a shopping." The mall is not a building; it is a place for people to go shopping, for families and friends to gather, or for a community to hold events. It is the heart of suburbia.

**DEATH AND ABANDON**

2.1 *Causes of Downfall*

The mall: an American dream that crumbled.

It is this author's opinion that suburbia idealized malls as eternal constructions that would stand the test of time and maintain their crucial social functions forever. In reality, however, malls have been abandoned. It is hard to understand why these places, once symbols of consumer bliss, are no longer central to American life.

Part of the downfall of malls is economical. According to Abha Bhattarai\textsuperscript{12} in her article "Zombie Mall," the mall's decay has its roots in the Great Recession of 2008; this is the point at which most of the malls' empires started to deteriorate. The severe global economic collapse involved more than 8 million Americans losing their jobs, savings, and homes. People did not

\textsuperscript{11} Underhill, “Inside the Machine,” page 30

have enough money to cover bare daily essentials, so they did not spend money on frivolous shopping at the mall. Significant numbers of customers simply stopped going to malls. Many malls had no choice but to close. Unfortunately, the malls still suffer from these effects today.

![Annual store closures](image)

*Figure 5: Annual Stores Closures Graphic. CoStar Group. The Washington Post.*

There are more reasons for the decline of the mall's popularity. Beginning around 2012, stores in malls began closing at an alarming rate, culminating in approximately 10,619 store closures in 2019 (Figure 05). A *Time* magazine article written by Josh Sanburn\(^\text{13}\) summarizes the various causes of these closures: "One out of every four malls in the U.S. could be out of business, victims of changing tastes, a widening wealth gap and the embrace of online shopping for everything from socks to swing sets." Widespread use of the internet and the growth of "e-tail" have combined with shoppers' changing behaviors and preferences. These changes are evident in all generations, from Baby Boomers to Millennials. Market research\(^\text{14}\) shows that

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convenience, better prices, and free shipping make people of all ages more likely to shop online instead of physically going to malls (Figure 6 and 7).

Some people still prefer to shop in person because they desire to touch or try out items before purchasing. There is no doubt that technology will eventually make experiencing the feel of a product through cellphone or laptop screens possible, which further hurt brick and mortar.

**Figure 6:** What is the primary reason you buy from a brand's website? Ecommerce Research.

**Figure 7:** What is the primary reason you would decide to buy from a physical store rather than an online store? Ecommerce Research.
2.2 Leave as it is?

According to Bhattarai\textsuperscript{15}, "Dozens [of malls] nationwide have shuttered in the past decade, and a quarter of the estimated 1,100 that remain are projected to follow by 2022, opening

\textsuperscript{15} Bhattarai, “Malls are Dying.”
large swaths of empty space." The mall, as we knew it, is dead and buried. As discussed in the previous section, the 2008 recession and growth of the internet and "e-tail" are the main culprits in the shopping mall's demise. (Figure 8 and 9). Although we could attempt to prevent malls from dying with some temporary solutions, I am more interested in new initiatives to revive and reinvent these spaces.

**Figure 10:** Carpenter's Shelter inside the old Macy's. Landmark Mall. Photo by Margaret Myers.

Bhattarai\(^{16}\) also states some developers and municipalities are looking to revive abandoned malls by finding "a new function" for these old buildings, such as health clinics, independent boutiques, megachurches, homeless shelters, fitness centers, video gaming hubs, movie filming locations, and more. Switching a place's function is not quickly done; however, it takes a lot of public and private investment and, most importantly, the community's acceptance and developers' profit to make a "reinvention" project work. For these reasons, many of the

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
functional adaptation-type projects are either temporary or unsuccessful. Shannon Steene reported a situation that illustrates this problem: in Alexandria, Virginia, where Macy's at Landmark Mall gave space to short-term housing for homeless and low-income people (Figure 10). A partnership between Carpenters Shelter and Alexandria Housing Development Corporation developed the project, which provided 60 beds and nearly 100 low-cost apartments.

It is important to note that the revitalization projects that achieve satisfactory results are usually not accessible to all social classes.

There is still hope, however. Various groups are bringing attention to the problem of abandoned malls and informing the public about potential uses. Seph Lawless's book *Abandoned Malls of America* illustrates this situation by photographing 20 abandoned shopping malls around the U.S.; also, Peter Blackbird and Brian Florence have a blog called *Dead Malls.com* where they map all dead malls state-by-state.

This context is where I established my thesis project. By gathering data and information about dead malls, I will develop a prototype for malls across the U.S., which will appeal to developers and communities alike.
North Dekalb Mall, the first enclosed mall in metro Atlanta, opened its doors to the public in 1965 in one of Atlanta's wealthiest suburbs: this mall was a developer's dream, with ideal conditions for such a project. According to an article in *SkyMall*, there was no competition in the area, plus the right demographics made building a mall in this area attractive.

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to developers. The "big box" is strategically positioned near several busy roadways: Interstate 285 (Atlanta's beltline), Lawrenceville Highway (U.S. Highway 29), and Stone Mountain Freeway (U.S. Highway 78) are all nearby, and bus routes also serve the location. Therefore, this spot was a perfect choice for building a mall (Figure 11 and 12).

![Rich's North Dekalb](image)

*Figure 13: Rich's Flyer. Birdhouse Books, 2016.*

At the time of its opening, the mall's leading two stores were its anchors, Rich's and Woolworth's. Nowadays, an A.M.C. movie theater is responsible for the majority of visitors (Figure 13). The mall has 447,000ft² of leasable space, and the anchor stores had an essential role in the mall floor plan. Each anchor had a strategic location, one on each floor: Rich's, with 160,000ft², was on the first floor, and Woolworth's was on the second, with 39,500ft². The developer's choice for the stores' positions meant that shoppers had to follow a path through a wide range of stores, which encouraged them to purchase more goods.
Unfortunately, malls became popular and spread throughout the metro Atlanta area. Consequently, the North Dekalb Mall was not the only star shining on the mall scene anymore. It faced stiff competition from other malls established in the area, such as Perimeter and Northlake Malls. These new malls offered the public easier access to major highways like I-285, as well as different stores than North Dekalb Mall. By the mid-1980s, North Dekalb Mall was suffering, and its owners were desperate for a solution to revive the mall and recover its popularity with shoppers. In 1986, the developers proposed a name change and a massive expansion to make the mall relevant again. The North Dekalb Mall was renamed "The Market Square of North Dekalb" and grew to 635,000ft². The change also brought in new anchors, such as Lechmere, Uptown, Mervyn's, and a new food court.

Figure 14: North Dekalb Mall Food Plaza 01. SkyMall, 2017.
Competition remained fierce even with these changes. The lack of store exclusivity, together with shifting demographics in housing surrounding the mall, made it difficult for Market Square to survive. In 2000, the mall was renamed, going back to its old name of North Dekalb Mall. This marketing strategy had failed, and store bankruptcies and vacancies began. The situation worsened when the anchor stores within the mall, such as Macy's and Davison's, started to compete with each other.
Figure 16: North Dekalb Mall Floor Plan. Sterling Organization.

With the mall on its last legs, discount stores like Ross Dress for Less and Burlington Coat Factory occupied some empty storefronts. The A.M.C. Theater (Figure 16) was also another hopeful attempt to attract more people. Current plans to save the mall include adding a Costco and converting the mall to a mixed-used development (multifamily and hotel). While these ideas have merit, they are not easy to execute. Because these initiatives require a lot of private incentives, they often fail.
Despite these efforts, the Sterling Organization, owners of North Dekalb Mall, decided to proceed with the idea of demolishing the mall after meeting with the community to approve a rezoning pre-application. As a result, it now looks like a mixed-used complex is coming to the area in 2021, against this author's idea of revitalizing the existing structure of North Dekalb Mall (Figure 17).
3.2. Northlake Mall, Tucker, GA

Figure 18 (Left): Northlake Mall facade. Photo by Northlake Mall Facebook Page.
Figure 19 (Right): Location of Northlake Mall, Tucker, GA. Google Maps, 2020.
Figure 20 (Bottom): Northlake Mall Grand Opening Celebration, 1971. Photo by Dennis Wilhoit. Pinterest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address: 4800 Briarcliff Rd NE, Atlanta, GA 30345</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opened: 1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of stores and services: 100+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Google
North Dekalb Mall was a prototype in Georgia for many of the new malls in Atlanta. Northlake Mall was one example of the kinds of malls built based on this prototype.

![Northlake Mall Floor Plan, 1971. Mall Hall of Fame.](image)

**Figure 21:** Northlake Mall Floor Plan, 1971. Mall Hall of Fame.

Opened in 1971, Northlake Mall could not have asked for a better location. Situated at the intersection of two busy surface roads, Briarcliff and Lavista, the mall is easily accessible by bus and car. Two features, however, made Northlake more attractive than North Dekalb: size and three anchor stores. Beginning with a massive area of 1,000,000ft$^2$, this mall had two levels with 97 stores and a movie theater, in addition to three anchors stores: Sears (200,000ft$^2$), JC Penney (187,000ft$^2$), and Davison's (179,000sf$^2$) (Figure 21).
Figure 22: Detail of fountain and elevator of Northlake Mall Court. Photo by George Bryant, Architect

Figure 23: Northlake Mall Floor Plan, 1987. Mall Hall of Fame.
It did not take long for Northlake Mall to be threatened by another new mall. Gwinnett County was the next site for suburban sprawl in Atlanta, resulting in Gwinnett Place Mall's opening in 1987. As a consequence, Northlake Mall had to update and improve. The approach taken here was quite different from the one developer used at North Dekalb Mall. Renovations completely changed the exterior building façade, the interior aesthetic, and technical details, resulting in a European postmodern look with a fountain, cafes, a food court, and elevators (Figure 22 and 23).

Predictably, the new success did not last long, and once again, in 1992, the mall underwent a significant expansion of 63,000ft². Although many new stores, like Parisian (1994), Old Navy (2000), and Kohl's (2008), tried to succeed at Northlake, ultimately, the ghost of storefront
vacancy overtook the mall. Even two of the anchor stores eventually fell; Kohl's closed its doors in 2016, followed by Sears in 2018; small stores inside the mall also suffered massive closures (Figure 24 and 25).

![Northlake Mall Floor Plan, 2008](image)

*Figure 25: Northlake Mall Floor Plan, 2008. Mall Hall of Fame.*

With two of its anchors lost, developers sought a new beginning for Northlake Mall. According to Caleb J. Spivak and Andy Miller, Emory University Healthcare took over some of the mall's space. A.T.R. Corinth Partners have plans for a partial remodel that is scheduled to

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be concluded by 2021. "Our lease with Emory signifies the start of reimagining the former mall as 'Northlake,' a dynamic mixed-use development incorporating office, medical, retail, and restaurants," Frank Mihalopoulos, partner with A.T.R. Corinth Partners, said in a statement. "We want to provide retail and restaurant options, along with welcoming gathering spaces, to reconnect the community with Northlake as a place to spend time with family and friends."

Figure 26: Conceptual Design for Emory (Exterior) - Northlake Mall. Wakefield Beasley & Associates, I.N.C. What Now Atlanta, 2019.

Figure 27: Conceptual Design for Emory (Interior) - Northlake Mall. Wakefield Beasley & Associates, I.N.C. What Now Atlanta, 2019
Hopefully, this new area of 224,000ft² combined with a further million square foot expansion by Emory will revive this forgotten complex (Figure 26 and 27). This new function could bring two happy endings to Northlake Mall. Maybe Emory will occupy the whole space in the long term, or perhaps this initiative will entice other companies to invest in this mall. Either way, this mall will be back in people's lives once again.

As with North Dekalb Mall, Northlake Mall hopes to escape demolition through mixed-use repurposing. Many abandoned malls do not have the same advantage of being near a private university health system with deep pockets. For those unfortunate malls, the only option is to give its place to another building that might suffer the same future. It begs the question: could there be another way? Competition and private investments are not the only answer.
3.3. Cumberland Mall, Atlanta, GA

![Cumberland Mall Image](image)

Figure 28 (Left): Cumberland Mall. Photo by Cumberland Mall Facebook Page.

Figure 29 (Right): Location of Cumberland Mall, Atlanta, GA. Google Maps, 2020.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address</th>
<th>2860 Cumberland Mall SE, Atlanta, GA 30339</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opened</td>
<td>August 8, 1973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>Crow Carter Associates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Brookfield Properties Retail Group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Google

The mall seems to be a story of constant evolution. Each new mall was a better version of its predecessor. This situation happened with Cumberland Mall; this mall was even better than Northlake's in-store arrangement and aesthetics. Cumberland Mall opened in 1973 near the suburbs of Vinings and Smyrna. Although it appeared to be a traditional suburban mall, Cumberland was a symbol of progress designed to attract people from across the metro area.
Figure 30: Cumberland Floor Plan, 1973. Mall Hall of Fame.

Figure 31: Cumberland 70's Interior, 1973
Mall Hall of Fame. Photo from Malls of America Blogspot
This mall had four anchors: Rich's, Davison's, JC Penney, and Sears. The mall also featured over 100 secondary storefronts occupied by famous brand names, all arranged through over three stories with a central courtyard, the project's focal point. The courtyard was both a circulation strategy and an essential component of the mall's atmosphere. With brass handrails, brown tiles, and a fountain with trees, the courtyard added a modern aesthetic to this project's vital central space. (Figures 30 and 31).

From a project perspective, it is easy to think that Cumberland Mall was a success. But as the mall's history shows, it too suffered from competition, decay, and remodeling.

Cumberland Mall lost its battle against Town Center Mall in Kennesaw. The 1989 renovation erased Cumberland's identity: the central court fountain with trees was removed from the mall to provide space for sports stores and kiosks. Also, in the early 2000s, anchors like Rich's closed their doors, while Davison's and JC Penney were demolished (Figure 32).
To bring people back to the mall, the old JC Penney was converted to a Costco in 2005, while the old Davison's space contains chain restaurants and services, separate from the rest of the mall (Figure 33). Why break the mall into two pieces and different places? A nearby office building brings some business to Cumberland Mall, but this needs new ideas if it is going to survive.
According to writer Alex Tostado, Brookfield Properties Retail Group plans to give Cumberland Mall a second (third? fourth?) chance: "Brookfield hopes to reshape the mall into a town center with 445,000 square feet of office space, 312 multifamily residences, 31,200 square feet of retail and restaurant space and ten bus bays. Additionally, What Now Atlanta reported that Cobb County recently issued permits for a new Round 1 Bowling & Amusement attraction to begin construction for a new 80,000-square-foot venue at the former Sears, which closed in 2018." In July of 2020, this group submitted approval to redevelop the eastern portion of Cumberland Mall. The project consists of rezoning the area to turn into a mixed-use complex featuring offices, multifamily residences, retail stores, restaurants, bus bays, and even an amusement area (Figure 34).

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The developers believe that Cumberland Mall's retrofitting will be a great project for the area both due to its location (across Cobb Parkway from the Cobb Galleria Centre convention center and diagonally Interstate 75-285 interchange) and the success of recent additions to the surrounding area, like the new Atlanta Braves ballpark (Truist Park, formerly SunTrust Park), and Battery Atlanta mixed-use village.

BREATH

4.1. A Hopeful Memory

A mall: a place filled with stores selling goods to satisfy consumers' needs in exchange for money. Nowadays, with technology, the space between people and goods is as easy and quick as a mouse click. It's difficult to imagine why anyone would still want to go to a mall to shop when online shopping is so much more convenient and fuller of variety. For most people, online shopping is part of everyday life. The buildings once serving retail functions are now "Junkspace," a term architect Rem Koolhaas\(^{21}\) uses to define architecture in a state of decay.

How did malls become Junkspaces? As Koolhaas states, "We have built more than did all previous generations put together, but somehow we do not register on the same scales." This type of construction was built uncontrolled. The only thing that mattered in a project was maximizing the numbers of stores and anchors and preserving the developer's investment. No one perceived the mall as an excellent architectural product, even though they were expensive to build, construct, and maintain.

Now the damage is done. Abandoned malls litter the country. There is no way to undo things, but perhaps, there is an answer to all this chaos.

For an abandoned, empty mall, demolition is the most logical and inexpensive solution. Unfortunately, in most cases, whether to keep or demolish a mall is in developers' hands. How can architects, people who create buildings, help? They, after all, are responsible for a building's feel. Can they bring new life to old malls? In an interview with Katja Eichinger, Koolhaas gave his thoughts about this problem.

K.E.: How do you design better malls? What avoids turning a mall or a store into a "junkspace?"

R.K.: One of the key things is to end the endlessness. And that's part of trying to insert some sense of reality. I am very nervous about the whole idea of a brand. Branding. Especially the American interpretation of a brand, which is to reduce something to an essence, and once you have the essence, it can never change.

In other words, according to Koolhaas' view, mall architecture was practically endless brand advertising, turning the entire building into a capitalist tool.

A transition from place to space happened in this type of building. Once perceived as a place filled with joy and shareable experiences, the mall turned into an unmeaningful commercial space "junking" cities and towns. But how can we bring the place-ness back?

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Memory drives human beings; it helps us form attachments and feels engaged with people, places, and things in our lives. According to Stacey Hopkins, memory is also present in architecture: "The symbiotic relationship between architecture and memory is forged in each one's appropriation of the other to make connections between space and time; the fragmentation between present and past disappears at one place, through imaginary, unites with another."

Architectural components, such as material choices, make a space unique for each person, depending on their past experiences and memories. Every time a person interacts with a building, they create a memory that retains all the space's information. Even if the building or place does not physically exist anymore, it lives in this person's memory.

Perhaps the answer is to retrofit malls, preserving memories of their places but bringing in new functions and new vitality. Using this approach, we can re-establish a connection to the past by making this building enjoyable and creating new memories. New Urbanism can be the tool to revive the mall's essence.

4.2. New Urbanism

Before analyzing how New Urbanism could improve the mall's situation, I must reiterate its roots: Live, Work, and Play. It is not easy to have these three functions in the same place. New Urbanism, however, has always thought about space in this multi-functional way. Inspired by European and ancient architecture, New Urbanism brings back Roman building concepts. One such building concept is Trajan's Market, built in 110 AD by the imperator Trajan and his...
architect Apollodorus of Damascus, which is considered one of the world's oldest shopping malls. But this building was more than just a mall; it was a mixed-use development.

According to Mark Cartwright, this complex featured a covered market, small shopfronts, and a residential apartment block divided into three different levels. The first two levels, the ground and first floor, were dedicated to stores, storage of goods, and offices. Meanwhile, the residential functions remained in the central portion of the building near Via Biberatica (Figure 35). How a building participates in a community's life is key to any project,

![Figure 35: Trajan’s Market. Image Credit: Future P.L.C.](https://www.ancient.eu/article/616/trajans-market/)

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whether Trajan's Market or a modern-era shopping mall. The organization should be the main component. As Peter Calthorpe$^{25}$ said, "The re-integration of civic and commercial is essential to create strong communities." Having a strong community means having easy access to high-quality activities, transit, work, leisure, housing, and architecture. Malls can be part of this community make-up.

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Abandoned malls could be part of a project's re-functioning. For example, an urban park called Tainan Spring replaced an old mall's parking garage with a "water plaza" filled with remains of the building; an old mall was converted to apartments at the Providence Arcade mall in Rhode Island, and Burbank Town Center in California reinvented its old food court as an art
gallery (Figure 36, 37, 38, and 39). These examples show that malls can still be part of their communities if they are assigned functions that integrate and work with their surroundings.

4.3. Teamwork

![Diagram of T.O.D. Neighborhood](image)

*Figure 40: Peter Calthorpe Diagram of T.O.D. Neighborhood. Peter Calthorpe, 1993.*

It is first necessary to plan the neighborhood Transit-Oriented Development (T.O.D.) to choose a mall's new function. According to Calthorpe, a T.O.D. neighborhood is a community located near bus stops, arterial lines, and compounded by residential, services, retail, entrainment, civic and recreational uses. Starting with commercial use, located in the community's core, offices and retail stores are responsible for the complex's vitality, attractiveness, and walkability (foot and bicycle)(Figure 40).

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26 Ibid., page 94.
Housing should consist of various options: apartments, single-family houses or townhouses, and condominiums, to appeal to all types of people and families. Residential spaces should be placed near commercial spaces to create diversity, economic support, and a dynamic feel in the community. There are secondary regions in addition to commercial and residential areas defined as all services and single-family residences within a range of one mile of a complex (besides offering bicycle and transit connections); these areas are also limited as part of the project.

After analyzing the commercial and residential needs, it is crucial to dive into public use analyses. Public spaces are defined by plazas, green spaces, public buildings, and public services; these places reflect the community's identity. These spaces are where the magic happens: people who live in, work in and visit the complex use them to gather, share experiences, and create memories. Malls were originally introduced into suburbs to solve the lack of public spaces in these communities. As this essay has highlighted, many of these malls have become "dead malls," resulting in the continued lack of public spaces. This is where retrofitted malls belong. A mall's new function as a public space could be a perfect fit that reflects the community's past and serves as a redeveloped site for future memory-making.

My project looks into how a mall can be repurposed in an existing neighborhood. I will examine the micro and macro aspects of such a project to develop a public space prototype whose function will integrate a mixed-use complex with an existing area. By combining the past with the present, I believe retrofitted malls can become a vital part of our communities.
5. THESIS PROJECT

After a comprehensive analysis regarding the history of malls and their downfall, it was necessary to get into more in-depth on one of the case studies to create a prototype of mall revitalization. Among the three examples, North Dekalb Mall seemed to be the best option due to its location near Interstate 285, Lawrenceville Highway, Stone Mountain Freeway, and bus routes. The residential area surrounding the mall also lacks infrastructure, making it an even more complex and interesting project.

In the diagram above, I have labeled the primary and secondary areas (Figure 41) within and around the mall. A quick look shows that the neighborhood could benefit from a mixed-use
complex because there isn't much currently available: just a small supermarket, a few beauty salons, a bank, a mechanic, a gas station, and a couple of fast-food restaurants.

With this issue duly spotted, I began to form a strategy that would both address the neighborhood's needs and revive the old structure of the mall. The project's main idea was to create a retrofitted human-scale place through a healthier environment where people could live, work, and play.

My starting point was to study the site's accessibility for car and pedestrian traffic. As the diagram above, called Accessibility (Figure 42), illustrates, new connections need to be established throughout the surrounding areas (Neighborhood and North Dekalb Mall). A walkable pathway for pedestrians should be constructed between the South Fork Peachtree Creek Park and trails, North Dekalb Mall Community Garden, and residential areas (Harrington Dr. and
Latham Rd). Also, car routes need to be improved from Mistletoe Rd, North Druid Hills Rd. NE, and Lawrenceville Hwy.

Once I identified the necessary new routes, the next step of the project was defining the mall's area that could be demolished. Following one of the new urbanism concepts, retrofit, the project's idea was to keep the mall's original footprint and structure as much as possible. In this way, the accessibility of new routes could be used as guides to demolish parts of the mall and build the new complex's sidewalks and streets, preserving the remaining stores as they are an essential piece of the mall's history. The old mall's Food Court would become a green plaza surrounded by the old columns of the mall (Figure 43).

After having the new routes and demolition defined, the next step was to organize the uses of this new complex. To easily identify it, I developed a series of diagrams.
Figure 44: 1st Floor Diagram  
Nathalia Santos, 2021

Figure 45: 2nd Floor Diagram  
Nathalia Santos, 2021
Figure 46: 3rd Floor Diagram
Nathalia Santos, 2021

Figure 47: 4th Floor Diagram
Nathalia Santos, 2021
Figure 48: 5th and 6th Floor Diagram
Nathalia Santos, 2021

Figure 49: 7th Floor Diagram
Nathalia Santos, 2021
Figure 50: 8th and 9th Floor Diagram
Nathalia Santos, 2021

Figure 51: Building Complex
Nathalia Santos, 2021
a. **1st floor (Figure 44).** On the first floor, the old stores of North Dekalb Mall are replaced by a series of new uses. Supported by new concept ideas, now the neighborhood could count on an infrastructure of restaurants, coffee shops, pharmacies, banks, supermarkets, gyms, schools, and stores. The old A.M.C. Theater and Post Office will remain; their functions reactivated in the complex. Meanwhile, anchors like Macy's, Marshall's, and Burlington will be turned into parking lots.

b. **2nd Floor (Figure 45).** Because most of the anchors have considerable ceiling height (Burlington and Marshall's) or are three-story structures (Macy's), their buildings could be repurposed into 4-6 level parking garages.

c. **3rd and 4th floor (Figure 46 and 47).** Together with parking lots, new buildings will be constructed on top of the old mall structure. Responsible for bringing work into the complex and secondary areas, the new lofts and offices are characterized by their double-story height and position surrounding the central plaza.

d. **5th, 6th, and 7th floors (Figure 48 and 49).** Distributed in three different buildings, residences are strategically located near the existing residential areas (Latham Rd, and Harrington Dr), and the South Fork Peachtree Creek park and North Dekalb Community Garden. These apartments provide housing to inhabitants of the mixed-use complex.

e. **8th and 9th floors (Figure 50).** These floors are also part of the apartment units on the two buildings near Latham Rd and Harrington Dr. However, the third building near the South Fork Peachtree Creek Park and North Dekalb Community Garden has its two last floors dedicated to a hotel function.
Lastly, the building contains a central plaza and green areas surrounding the first floor, in addition to green roofs on the lofts, offices, and apartments. These areas are responsible for promoting activities to the primary and secondary areas, such as gathering and community gardens. (Figure 52)
With the function established, it is possible to develop a study of the urban spaces in private, semi-private, and public spaces that helps to understand better the demands, access, and levels of privacy of the complex and neighborhood areas, such as the green areas (public), stores, apartments, and hotels (private), and streets (semi-private). However, it is vital to notice that the classification of the urban space does not limit the interaction among function; otherwise, it communicates its functions through physical parameters and spatial organizations. (Figure 53)
Another essential aspect I analyzed is pathways (Figure 54). Designed in a human-scale base, the complex pathways encourage walkability with oversized sidewalks (12’-0”), shade trees, urban equipment (benches, trash cans, light posts) in addition to parallel parking that helps to decrease the automobile velocity in the streets. It is also vital to notice that this quality is also enhanced for the pathways where just the pedestrians are allowed.

In the end, after a careful analysis of the project concepts developed on the diagrams above, two sections, A-A and B-B, were developed to illustrate the idea that what a retrofit of a mall could be. In other words, how a dead mall was transformed into a new lively complex bringing gathering and meaning to an existing community.
6. THESIS EXHIBITION

The thesis exhibition took place at the Gallery at Ernest G. Welch – School of Art and Design at Georgia State University. The exhibition's focus is to create awareness among people that the mall's architecture does not have to end in a demolition once it could be transformed into something better to serve the community and the surrounding areas.

Figure 57: Gallery Floor Plan
Nathalia Santos, 2021
**Figure 58:** Front Wall Exhibition  
Georgia State University, 2021

**Figure 59:** Wall 01 – Exhibition  
Nathalia Santos, 2021

**Figure 60:** Wall 02 – Exhibition  
Nathalia Santos, 2021
Figure 61: Wall 03 - Exhibition
Nathalia Santos, 2021

Figure 62: Wall 04 - Exhibition
Nathalia Santos, 2021

Figure 63: Wall 05 – Exhibition
Nathalia Santos, 2021
The exhibition is organized to show visitors the process of architecturally retrofitting a mall. The front gallery wall is covered by the abandoned mall's picture, and the project footprint of North Dekalb Mall welcomes visitors to the exhibition. (Figure 57 and 58)

Next, visitors can take a photo tour through the North Dekalb Mall as it currently exists (Wall 01 and 02). These images and floor plans show North Dekalb Mall abandoned, and as it was originally designed to be, these walls provide a historical view of the changes implemented over the years as developers attempted to revive the mall and attract more customers. (Figure 59 and 60)

As the next step (Wall 03 and 04) visitors can see my plans for the new North Dekalb Mall. A series of diagrams show accessibility, secondary and primary areas, and demolition in detailed area studies. Other diagrams of new functions, green areas, pathways, heights, public and private spaces demonstrate the new concepts underpinning the mall's retrofitting. (Figure 61 and 62)

I created some artistic sections (Wall 05) to illustrate how I would revive the old mall's structure where residents and the surrounding community could live, work, and play. (Figure 63)
7. CONCLUSION

Junkspace. That is the architecture state that should be avoided at all costs. A building should never be abandoned or left waiting for demolition. This thesis aims to bring this awareness to the problem of abandoned malls. As demonstrated in this paper, the number of abandoned malls has dramatically increased over the years. As the thesis prototype, North Dekalb Mall proves that abandoned malls can be retrofitted to resume their social function.

North Dekalb Mall and many other malls have great potential to become mixed-use complexes that can help transform surrounding neighborhoods and community areas, establishing the idea that people can live, work, and play in the same place.

Finally, this thesis aims to show that simply deciding to end a building's life should not be the first option. Instead, the best choice, in most cases, is to find a way to reintegrate and repurpose these buildings, to help them resume their social functions, and find ways for them to fulfill community needs. At the same time, we can preserve a meaningful symbol of American culture for future generations.
8. BIBLIOGRAPHY


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