Wide Open Spaces
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A local artist’s multimedia project links communities across the country that have sought creative ways to reuse abandoned big-box buildings.

Grace Fellowship Church in Latham is not so different from the typical nondenominational church. People of different Christian persuasions come together to worship their God, receive baptism, and participate in myriad services, including youth programs for their kids and coffeehouse get-togethers.

As a place of worship, however, there is something rather unusual about the church on Delatour Road. The boxy building with its plain sloping roof, storefront windows, and wide glass-and-metal doors gives away the answer: The church is housed in a renovated Grand Union building.

“Initially, we intended to build our own building,” says Bill Minchin, executive pastor. “However, limited availability of our ideal property location near the Northway and in the Latham area as well as the amount of square footage [we were looking for] made us consider other options.”

The Grand Union building was abandoned in 1996, as the grocery chain began to close its stores all over the Northeast. The structure had been empty for about five years when church officials, looking for a bigger location, bought it in 2001. Worshippers breathed new life into it the following year.

Renovated commercial structures like this rehabbed Grand Union, and especially so-called “big box” buildings that house Wal-Marts, Targets, Home Depots and other superstores, have been the focus of local artist Julia Christensen’s artistic endeavors for nearly two years.

Growing up in her Kentucky home of Bardstown, the multimedia artist, who now lives in Troy, watched Wal-Mart move in and out of three big-box stores as the superstore grew.

The town’s first Wal-Mart, erected in the early 1980s, was torn down and replaced by a courthouse after the retailer moved across town to open a bigger store in 1990. The megaretailer vacated the second building when it opened an even larger store a mile down
the road this year.

“That reclamation of space really got me interested in how other towns are dealing with abandoned buildings,” says Christensen, adjunct professor of arts at the University at Albany.

Christensen started her project on how communities are reusing the big box in January 2004 while she was a graduate student studying electronic arts at RPI. Grace Fellowship caught her attention for the same reasons the courthouse in Kentucky did. It was nearby, and she was intrigued by how residents were pursuing creative ways on their own to reuse space that had left an empty footprint in their community. They weren’t waiting for their local governments or commercial districts to refurbish or replace what many times turn into town eyesores for years to come.

Christensen has driven nearly 40,000 miles across the United States to search out similar stories about building reuses. During her travels, her curiosity turned into a mission to connect communities facing the growing phenomenon of abandoned big-box buildings.

Although the courthouse replaced the torn-down big-box building in Kentucky, Christensen is largely focused on megastore structures that have been converted to new uses.

She has visited nearly three dozen of these renovated commercial buildings in 25 states, and has met the citizens who have converted these formerly empty—and mostly less-than-aesthetically-appealing—structures into spaces that have become a renewed part of communities.

“In each town I’ve visited, people are very aware of their own situation,” Christensen says. “They’re very aware of the empty building they have to deal with. But until I came along, they didn’t realize that this is a nationwide pattern happening everywhere. By sharing the experiences of other towns, I hope to open people up to understanding alternative ideas for how these spaces can be utilized.”

Since the 28-year-old hit the road, the project has taken a life of its own, she says, in a growing collection of photographs and videos of interviews and stories collected throughout her travels. She incorporates these field recordings into presentations she gives at churches, civic centers, colleges, and city and town halls around the country about how communities are dealing with this common situation.

Christensen also has started to exhibit video installations in Louisville, Ky., based on her project, and has created a Web site, www.bigboxreuse.com, which was chosen as a Yahoo! “pick of the day” last year. She is now working on a book.

Christensen has lectured at the Yale School of Architecture, the Stanford Arts Department, and the Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Design, as well as at RPI, her alma mater, where she graduated this year with a master of fine arts degree. Recently, she spoke at the Boor Sculpture Studio at the University at Albany.

“Her work has poignancy,” says JoAnne Carson, chairwoman of the UAlbany arts department. “It’s a very hybrid, unique art that’s happening more often in which artists are working directly in
communities.”

Carson compared the process of Christensen’s work to environmental artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who have involved communities and incorporated whole landscapes, including islands, rural villages, and metropolitan areas into their artwork.

“The process of [their] work also involves the real world of city politics and regulations, land usage, and communities of people,” Carson adds.

As a multimedia artist, Christensen is talented in digital photography, video, and computer-based music and sound. All of this plays into her big-box project. She also draws from her experience in theater as a storyteller, telling stories to whoever will listen about her work and travel. In fact, her initial love of art came in the form of theater. As a high-school student, she attended the Interlochen Arts Academy, a performing arts boarding school in Michigan, where she studied as a theater major.

In the end, Christensen prefers to let her audiences decide for themselves on what the art is in her big-box reuse project—whether it’s in the photographs or videos and movie clips, in the creation of her Web site, in her presentations, or in the interactions between the audience and Christensen.

The project has attracted the attention of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, which explores land and landscape issues through research and art exhibition. The organization is headquartered in Culver City, Calif., and has a satellite office in Troy.

“Julia is the only person we are aware of who’s looked at the [big-box] phenomenon systematically, up close, and on a national scale,” says Matt Coolidge, CLUI director.

Although it is based on what she considers an important social issue, Christensen doesn’t think of her work as a form of activism, but as a project that allows her to collect and disseminate information, leaving the interpretation to her audience.

“This is a contentious topic for some, I know, and I steer clear of taking political sides,” Christensen says. “I try to keep my presentations open-ended so that everyone can take part in the discussions. I want to involve activists [against Wal-Mart] in my work. But, I also want to involve people who shop at Wal-Mart and other big-box stores, because these buildings are relevant to everyone. Some love big boxes, some hate them, some could care less, but nobody really likes the empty big boxes.”

The big-box store is generally defined as a large, freestanding, warehouse-like building with one major room. Stock comes off the truck and onto the shelves, so there’s no need for backroom storage space.
Some of these superstores close because of lack of business, but more often, says Christensen, they move into bigger and better space across town. As a result, they frequently leave behind their original quarters, which often remain empty for years.

There are few public statistics on the number of empty big boxes or the rate at which they are being abandoned. But Christensen suspects that communities are dealing with thousands of such structures in the United States. For example, she says, “Wal-Mart alone generally upgrades to a new store in five to seven years. So the turnover rate on these buildings is astounding.”

Wal-Mart’s real-estate Web page alone recently listed more than 350 buildings for sale or for lease.

Some of the converted commercial structures that Christensen has visited, such as Grace Fellowship, are not really considered big-box buildings. Still, Christensen felt compelled to include them in her project.

“When I was talking to people about big boxes in their towns, they would invite me to look at something. I would get there and it would sometimes be a grocery store in a strip mall or a department store,” she says. “But I’ve included all those experiences, too. All the locations included are a reflection of the public’s idea of the big box, and the experiences offer ideas that can inform the discussion about the big-box phenomenon in the United States.”

“Each story is completely different,” Christensen adds. “Each place offers a different look at how these buildings are being renovated and reused.”

For example, Sugar Creek Charter School in Charlotte, N.C., has been operating in a renovated Kmart since 2000. The school exemplifies some of the underlying challenges of remodeling a big commercial building. Having new electrical and structural elements helps. So do the vast parking lots designed to accommodate our vehicle-driven society.

Still, Christensen notes, “the fact of the matter remains: Big-box buildings are very, very big. The process of taking a roughly 100,000-square-foot room, breaking it into several smaller rooms and hallways, and getting the building ready for a drastically different use is a major project that involves major money and time.”

Currently, the school is using about half the space in the old Kmart, with the renovation being done in stages. “One day, this empty half will house a new cafeteria, gymnasium, and more classrooms for the school,” Christensen explains.

Also, since big-box retailers are generally wired for lights along the shopping aisles, often the hallways in renovated big boxes, as in Sugar Creek, resemble aisles running directly from one end of the building to the other. And since the large building does not have much outer wall space for windows, the school has had to add skylights all along the hallways to invite in more sunlight.

The building renovations share other similarities. The exterior, including the roof, doors, and even the signage, usually differ little
from the original look of the commercial structure. “Generally speaking, the exterior of a big box building is the last thing to be renovated. The function of the building always comes first,” Christensen says. In fact, she adds, many times any exterior renovations that are done are minimal. Maybe a coat of paint, and a new roof if absolutely necessary.

Studying the reuses has offered an interesting portrait of the changing face of America today, Christensen says. “The fact that towns have churches that see a Wal-Mart or a grocery store fit for use is a new insight into how downtowns are changing in this country,” she says. “As towns become less reliant on everything being within walking distance, and more reliant on access from the highway, these structures are becoming the new town centers. Religious and many other organizations are taking advantage of that.”

A main reason for thinking about reusing big-box space is a practical one, Christensen says. When a big-box retailer moves into town, stoplights are put into place, roads are built, and exits off the highway are constructed so that consumers have easy access to the store. When the retailer moves across town, all this infrastructure is left in place, making the location ideal for any number of civic uses.

Grace Fellowship, in the former Colonnade strip mall in Latham, epitomizes many of Christensen’s big-box observations. The storefront facades, which once held a Chinese restaurant, a book store, and a day-care center, have remained virtually the same except the replacement of some large storefront windows with smaller ones and a touch-up of paint where absolutely needed.

The dull, whitish-gray building—its original color—matches the vast lot of faded parking lines. The only dab of color comes from a few yellow, orange, and purple mums alongside the metal sliding doors that lead directly to the sanctuary. The red Colonnade sign indicating the mall entrance is still left protruding out among the few trees along Route 2.

“We were going to put up our own sign with Grace Fellowship on it, but we just haven’t done it,” says Wanda Evanchick, senior pastor assistant.

Still, what’s on the outside has not hurt the church’s popularity. Since Grace Fellowship moved to its new location, the size of the congregation has more than doubled, from 600 to 1,500.

Inside, it’s a little harder to imagine, unless you’ve shopped there in the past, the hustle and bustle of people pushing metal shopping carts through aisles of food under unforgiving fluorescent light. The church transformed the Grand Union’s entire shopping area—deli, dairy and seafood sections, and all the rest—into its 1,500-seat sanctuary.

The high ceiling, layered with acoustical panels and dotted with soft lighting, offers a reverent atmosphere that doesn’t give anything away. The wide stage that serves as the altar, with two large LCD screens on either side and theater lighting directly above, looks out onto rows of plush folding chairs.

One building renovation that added a new dimension to Christensen’s project is the Jen Library at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia, which Christensen considers “one of the most exquisite
The interior design is based on the aesthetics of an Italian cruise ship of the 1940s. Student sculpture and other artwork hang throughout the 85,000-square-foot building.

The library was not in the big-box building Christensen expected to see. It's in a large, early 20th-century building centered in historic downtown Savannah. Built in 1925, the building was home to at least five businesses, including Levy and Maas Brothers department stores, before the college purchased it in 1996 and completed renovations three years later.

The library led Christensen to understand more about downtown revitalization and shifting civic centers. As big-box retail centers continue to flourish directly off the highway, the businesses that once made up the centers of towns and cities often disappear as a result. When churches, schools and other community groups retake big boxes that are a stone’s throw from the exit ramp, suburban sprawl becomes even more pronounced, further depriving downtown municipalities of sustaining vitality and identity.

“In the town of Savannah, which is known for its beautiful architecture, we see adaptive reuse of old buildings at its finest,” Christensen said. “The Savannah College of Art and Design occupies more than 50 buildings in the historic downtown district of the town.”

Not all the stories Christensen has documented about big-box reuses have happy endings. The RPM Indoor Raceway in Round Rock, Texas, which offered go-kart racing, closed its doors this summer after two years of operation.

The raceway was constructed in a 92,000-square-foot Wal-Mart building after the superstore opened at a new location directly across the street. To Charlie Gifford, a techie from nearby Austin who was part of dot-com bubble bust of the 1990s, the space was part of a solid—and fun—business plan.

The biggest draw to the location for Gifford was the abundance of thriving retail outlets largely built around the headquarters of Dell Computer Corp., one of the largest employers in central Texas.

“It was difficult to imagine a better location,” Gifford says.

The closure of the raceway brings to light the complicated deed restrictions and lease deals involved in securing many commercial spaces. Gifford leased the building from a realtor, who bought it with the initial intent of having RPM as a tenant.

In the end, overhead costs—$43,000 a month in rent alone—of being a single-user in such a large space caught up with RPM. Since the raceway occupied about 70,000 square feet, Gifford tried to sublet the additional square footage to potential tenants, which included several restaurants, a rock-climbing gym, and an indoor laser-tag gaming company. All were already established businesses.

“Every sublet tenant I presented, the landlord refused to sign off on the sublease,” Gifford says. “As it turned out . . . the landlord had a different agenda for the property. His intent became clear much later. He used our business to land-bank that property until he could find tenants to his liking—first-rate national chain tenants.”
Within two weeks of RPM's closing, a Gold's Gym had signed a lease to rent the building.

The issue of taking advantage of lease options received public attention closer to home when Price Chopper in the Troy Plaza on Hoosick Street closed in April 2002. The store retained its lease on the property even after it shut its doors, making it difficult for any other store to consider taking over the site. After a public outcry, Price Chopper's parent company, Golub Corp., relinquished the lease and a Midland Foods grocery eventually took over the space.

Christensen recently returned to Troy after traveling throughout the summer to Virginia, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and other states. She'll hit the road again in December, first heading to the South and then to the West Coast, where she will take a teaching job at Stanford University next spring.

“Art is about communicating, and that's what Julia continues to do with this piece,” says Kathy High, chairwoman of the art department at RPI. “She has approached her project in an open-ended way without a particular political agenda, which has made it possible for all kinds of people to become involved. She has given a platform to those who would have otherwise never associated themselves with one another.”