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Thinking Inside the Big Box

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NEXT week, Julia Christensen will begin a cross-country drive to places no other tourist would care to notice. In her 1999 Subaru Forester, Ms. Christensen, a 28-year-old artist, will trawl the American landscape in search of big-box superstores that are now used as churches, schools, racetracks and, in one case, a museum dedicated to Spam, the canned meat.

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Julia Christensen may be the only scholar studying the conversion of big-box stores to unlikely new uses.

Ms. Christensen, who has made the field of big-box reuse her academic and artistic specialty, has already logged some 20,000 miles during two previous trips over the past two years in pursuit of former Wal-Marts, Winn-Dixies and Kmart. Along the way, she has become an expert in the ingenious and innovative ways that communities have reclaimed abandoned, architecturally uninspiring megastores.

"It's such a story every time of people being creative and resourceful about filling a huge hole in their town,"



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Julia Christensen

Julia Christensen recorded the rebirth of a Kmart in Austin, Minn., as a Spam museum.

said Ms. Christensen, who posts her findings at her Web site (bigboxreuse.com). "They're breathing life into these buildings."

She also lectures and consults on the topic, which was the focus of her recently awarded Master of Fine Arts degree in electronic arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic

Institute.

Between journeys, Ms. Christensen hunkers down in a three-room graduate-student apartment in a Victorian brick mansion in Troy, N.Y. A Hammond map of the United States dominates one wall of the living room. Her routes so far, snaking from Troy to points south and west and back, are highlighted in pink marker. Over the sofa hang photos of some of her favorite reused superstores: a Wal-Mart turned church in Pinellas Park, Fla., and a 40,000-square-foot former Kmart in Austin, Minn., which, with the addition of some brick gables, has become the Spam Museum.

Taped interviews with owners, neighbors, city officials and real estate executives are piled on her desk. Stored in her computers are thousands of photographs of big boxes and surrounding sprawl, some of which she plans to include in a book cataloging the transformations of stores.

Ms. Christensen is sought after by church leaders, city officials and developers, who solicit her advice on what to do with these bland structures, and how to cope with the devastating impact the shuttered buildings have on neighborhoods.

Still, Ms. Christensen doesn't have an obvious political agenda, or at least she doesn't let on about one. Her goal, she says, is to "focus on what the people and the communities are making happen now, and not on what a corporation did, so I can connect with all kinds of people."

As a result, her Web site has become a place for big-box reusers to network. Her presentations, using video, audio tapes and photographs taken on the road, are a kind of performance art. Originally trained as an actress, she tells

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anecdotes about how a church was carved out of a Winn-Dixie, or how a Kmart became an elementary school.

Kimberly M. Huston, president of the Nelson County Economic Development Agency in Bardstown, Ky., said that Ms. Christensen - who grew up in Bardstown and has lectured there - encourages her listeners to imagine the potential of big boxes. "She's been energizing people across the country," Ms. Huston said.

Bardstown has a Wal-Mart tale of its own, one that helped inspire Ms. Christensen's obsession. Over the past 14 years, two Wal-Marts in the town - with a population of around 10,000 and some 300 buildings in the National Register of Historical Places - have closed. One was razed by the county and replaced with a neo-classical justice center; the other is empty. A new 200,000-square-foot Wal-Mart opened last fall on the edge of town.

"Over and over, the question in Bardstown has been, how did this happen? How are we on our third Wal-Mart, in a town riddled with preservationists?" Ms. Christensen said. "When the justice center went up, on a site that was sitting empty for eight years, that got me thinking. This is such an interesting reclamation of space."

When retailers like Wal-Mart outgrow buildings, they usually move to even bigger quarters nearby rather than face the disruption of adding on to their stores. Retail chains are reluctant to sell unused buildings to competitors, which is why about 350 Wal-Marts are currently empty. Mia Masten, a Wal-Mart spokeswoman, said she wasn't aware of Ms. Christensen's work. She said the company likes to see its buildings recycled because "they're very versatile."

Ms. Christensen isn't the first person to chronicle superstore makeovers. Web sites like www.theboxtank.com and www.sprawl-busters.com, which focus on the darker side of sprawl, have mentioned inventive or bizarre reuse projects. Matthew Coolidge, a project manager for the Center for Land Use Interpretation, an organization in Culver City, Calif., which studies landscape change and sponsors artists, said Ms. Christensen is "the only one who's looked at the phenomenon systematically, up close and on a national scale."

On her trips, Ms. Christensen sleeps in a pup tent or in

cheap motels. She spends up to a week at each site, documenting it with digital cameras and interviewing the main players.

In her case studies, she has found some common traits, such as the surprising survival of original architectural features. Hormel Foods, the maker of Spam, gutted the Kmart for its Spam Museum and equipped the building with videos, interactive computer screens and dioramas that explain how the meat product is manufactured and marketed. Yet the exposed steel ceiling beams that once loomed over produce aisles are intact.

Ms. Christensen has also noticed how salvagers keep the roadside and facade signs and the vast parking lots.

These projects succeed, many new owners say, simply because people feel comfortable with mall-style architecture. At Calvary Chapel, a nondenominational church in Pinellas Park, Fla., which started out in a Winn-Dixie and has now expanded to an adjacent Wal-Mart, the low-slung architecture is a draw for the 3,000 congregants.

"The generation we live in today, when they look at an old-fashioned steepled church, there's a fascination but also a little bit of intimidation," said Bob Corry, an associate pastor. "If we dolled up our building, we'd be pushing away an element of our community that desperately needs to be welcomed."

Worshippers like to gather in the building's 80-by-120-foot lobby, which has a grill and a cafe, Mr. Corry said. Next on the construction agenda for the church are a day-care center and, after windows are cut into the store's base, a catering hall.

Ms. Christensen says she will return to Calvary Chapel in a few weeks to record the latest stages of its rebirth as a place of worship. But first she will visit sites in Kentucky, Missouri, Kansas, Texas and Alabama. "I could be this database that sits here and never moves, but it's been so important to me to go out and investigate," she said. "There's nothing on the Web site I haven't seen with my own eyes."

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