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Finding life in void big box stores leave behind

RPI student examines how communities fill empty retail spaces

By **KENNETH AARON**, Staff writer
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TROY -- At first glance, Julia Christensen's Web site seems to scream, "I drove my Subaru 17,000 miles around the U.S. and all I got was a bunch of photos of ex-big-box stores."

But Christensen, 28, an artist and graduate student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute who undertook the journey to show how communities reuse those sprawling spaces after their original tenants split, isn't interested in the buildings so much as the people who inhabit them. And they're all different.

"I was using the building, this identical building in every town, to reflect the stories of these people," she said. "They're making it work."

Besides the Web site, Christensen shares her work in an exhibit that she has presented at Yale University's School of Architecture and elsewhere. The program shows how each group adapts their cookie-cutter space differently. There's an abandoned downtown Kmart in Minnesota that was gutted and turned into the Spam Museum (the meat, not the e-mail.) In Latham, Grace Fellowship, a church, moved into a strip mall once anchored by a Grand Union; now, an 1,100-seat sanctuary dominates the old grocery store. In Austin, Texas, a former Wal-Mart was converted into a go-kart track.

"I mean, it's so much space," she said. "You have to dream a little."

As stores get bigger, the holes they leave in the landscape once they disappear get bigger, too. Often, sites sit vacant for years because retailers are loathe to let competitors move in.

It's a problem not likely to disappear anytime soon, said James Schwab, senior research associate at the American Planning Association and editor of Zoning Practice, an APA publication.

"Many of these stores are not built to last," he said. Stores that move in often assume they'll eventually want to relocate.

Rocco Ferraro, executive director of the Capital District Regional Planning Commission, said that reuse is possible -- unless, that is, the spaces aren't in demand. "Our service and retail market can only absorb so much, and we're starting to see that with our malls now," he said.

To avoid the specter of vacant space, Ferraro said communities could think of ways to create more mixed-use developments that involve retail, housing and other types of uses. So instead of languishing when tenants leave, these new spaces will already be part of where people live, work and shop.

Wal-Mart, the world's biggest retailer, lists nearly 350 sites for sale on its Web page.

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One of those is in Christensen's hometown, Bardstown, Ky. The retailer built a bigger Wal-Mart not far from the old one, and left the old one vacant.

It's not the first time Bardstown has faced a shuttered Wal-Mart. The first Wal-Mart in town sat vacant for nearly a decade, Christensen said, before it was torn down and a new courthouse put in its place .

It was that experience that led her to investigate how other communities handled big boxes that went bust. Then she hit the road in May 2004 for three months, taking photos and shooting video.

In these places that have figured out how to overcome their missing teeth, she found hope. "The impact can be absolutely devastating to towns," she said. "At this point, what I'm trying to talk about is how we're going to deal with it."

Christensen will get a master's degree this spring but she's not done with big boxes yet. There's a book on the subject she wants to publish. And there are other places to see.

"There's a line dancing joint in a Kmart in Kansas that I can't wait to check out," she said.

FREE TALK

Julia Christensen speaks about her big box project at 6 p.m. today in the Greene Gallery on RPI's campus. Admission is free.

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