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Stores as Schools: An Adaptive Reuse Alternative For Communities Dealing With Underutilized Commercial Space and Overcrowded Schools

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Abstract
Over the past two decades, underused shopping malls and big-box stores have become more prevalent in the landscape, even as newer ones are built. Shopping centers from the last half of the twentieth century may not have been designed to serve uses other than commercial, but that does not mean these buildings must or should only be thought of as single-use spaces. Projects from across the United States demonstrate that large, empty commercial structures can become municipal complexes, new town centers, mixed-use complexes, office buildings, churches, and gymnasiums. They also can be rehabilitated to fill the need for new

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schools in communities where there is no suitable or cheap land, limited funds, overcrowding, and growing enrollments. This thesis identifies twelve cases where public school districts have converted former shopping malls or big-box stores into schools and conducts histories on three of these cases. A detailed comparative analysis of three school conversion projects in Burnsville, Minnesota, Wake Forest, North Carolina, and Fort Myers, Florida is the foundation for the thesis research. By researching examples of retail conversion and assessing project history, this thesis determines common factors to these school projects and develops conclusions about relationships between school planning, growth management, and economic development. It develops a strong knowledge base that can be used to guide local governments interested in undertaking this type of initiative. Finally, the thesis demonstrates the importance of planning and building for future flexibility by underscoring the value of reusing the built form.

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