



Key Points:

- The dilemma is now what to do with a deserted mega complex in an island of overgrown asphalt parking.
- As we look to the future for our malls, we should do so knowing that every aspect of them will change.



**David Lenz, AIA, NCARB** is a project architect at Bergmann in Lansing. He has spent 14 years working in architecture with an MArch from UDM. Over the course of his professional career, he has worked at a variety of firms, including: Swanson Design Studios, Studio Intrigue Architects and currently at Bergmann. Lenz is also the President of the Mid-Michigan Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, a director of Lansing Economic Area Partnership Public Space Design Team, and a Lansing Board of Water and Light Commissioner (1st Ward).

**Published: March 2019**

**Previously published in:  
CAM Magazine**

AIA Michigan  
[www.aiami.com](http://www.aiami.com)

## The Abandoned Mall: Mirage or Oasis?

**David Lenz AIA, NCARB; Bergmann**

For much of the 1970s through early 2000s, shopping malls were the activity center of a region. Reaching their zenith as a destination for Gen Xers, malls provided—under one roof— a place to eat, shop, play, be entertained, or simply pass the time. As malls popped up across the country, they became ubiquitous and an essential element to our American culture and identity. Unabashed consumerism on full display. They were a symbol of the idyllic suburban American life...until they weren't.

As we move further and faster into the 21st century, many communities are faced with the reality of trying to reprogram and reimagine these acres of abandoned spaces. Has this been done before? Where can we find inspiration? What does the future hold?

Retrospectively, the decline of our suburban malls begins where it all began, with the anchor store. Large department stores formed the backbone of mall design, layout and organization. The anchor store's existence was even interwoven into lease and tenant agreements. While the details are unique to each mall, the basic formula holds true: set up a large department store on one side and community space (theater or food court) on the other. Connect these programs with a roof, tiled floor, sparkling storefronts, subtropical partial sun flora, surrounded by a sea of parking, and viola you have a thriving mall. With enough acreage and investment money, feel free to add additional anchor stores (on axis at the cardinal points if you please) and as many levels as you see fit. Due to the immense size of the mall developments, and the potential economic impact, urban planners rezoned whole cities to attract and entice their creation.

Malls, and by extension the anchor store, were the catalyst for numerous businesses to take a risk and set up shop a few spaces down in the always sunny homogenous retail mega-development. Hindsight is the privilege of the future; had we known of the disruptive nature of the internet and future online alphabet soup of big box retailers, would we have invested so heavily in a model whose very nature is to respond to consumer habits? Fashion is fickle, so is apparently how we spend our money. Malls provided consumers the convenience of spending money at their favorite stores all in the same relative place. The internet upped the ante by allowing for consumers to spend their money at their favorite stores without leaving their homes. Innovation is the child of invention. Once the anchor store loses viability, it doesn't take long for the smaller stores to drift off to sea.

The dilemma is now what to do with a deserted mega complex in an island of overgrown asphalt parking. Do you sell your soul for new tenants and hope



## Key Points:

- The dilemma is now what to do with a deserted mega complex in an island of overgrown asphalt parking.
- As we look to the future for our malls, we should do so knowing that every aspect of them will change.



**David Lenz, AIA, NCARB** is a project architect at Bergmann in Lansing. He has spent 14 years working in architecture with an MArch from UDM. Over the course of his professional career, he has worked at a variety of firms, including: Swanson Design Studios, Studio Intrigue Architects and currently at Bergmann. Lenz is also the President of the Mid-Michigan Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, a director of Lansing Economic Area Partnership Public Space Design Team, and a Lansing Board of Water and Light Commissioner (1st Ward).

**Published: March 2019**

**Previously published in:  
CAM Magazine**

AIA Michigan  
[www.aiami.com](http://www.aiami.com)

## The Abandoned Mall: Mirage or Oasis?

**David Lenz AIA, NCARB; Bergmann**

an unwitting “anchor store” will save you? Or do you reimagine and redevelop? Whatever the decision, economics will always be the driving factor.

We can, however, learn a lesson and diversify our future. Throughout history we can reliably depend on change being constant. As we look to the future for our malls, we should do so knowing that every aspect of them will change. Embrace this change and plan for it. Gone should be our idea of an almighty single retailer. Gone should be our idea of a single-use group building. Gone should be our idea of a shopping center. We should look toward what works – dense and diverse urban centers. The variety and diversity (socially, economically, and physically) that our urban centers encompass form the backbone of their design, layout, organization, and (gasp) even their varied lease and tenant rates.

As we look to the future, our desolate malls can become mixed-use developments like Hunt Valley Town Centre in Baltimore County. This once traditional mall flipped the script. The roof was removed, and the building was turned inside out to create an outdoor mall. Most surprisingly, multifamily homes were built around the redevelopment – emphatically answering the age-old chicken and egg question.

In Mountain View, California, the old Mayfield Mall has been famously repurposed into a burgeoning tech park. Breaking up the building, creating pedestrian friendly parking, utilizing unused space for exterior courtyards, this old mall has handsomely transformed into a bona fide campus layout. Out with the old and in with the new.

Not every community has a wildly successful international business to dump untold money into redevelopment, but communities like Providence, Rhode Island, has captured the best of community centers and retail shopping. In what is considered the nation’s oldest indoor shopping mall, a new sense of life has been breathed into a now historic landmark. The combination of living spaces, boutiques, pop-up businesses and local festivals transformed this “mall” into a living and breathing community.

It’s important to remember that each community has its own identity. A one-size-fits-all solution doesn’t work – a la the traditional mall. The key to revitalizing our abandoned malls is to think creatively and outside the proverbial box. Just like good architecture and vibrant cities, the solution is a monumental task undertaken by a diverse group of people. Any other way is destined for failure.