

Ken Friedlein examines how architecture and development change our world.

Can an old mall get a new life?

ESSAY BY KEN FRIEDLEIN

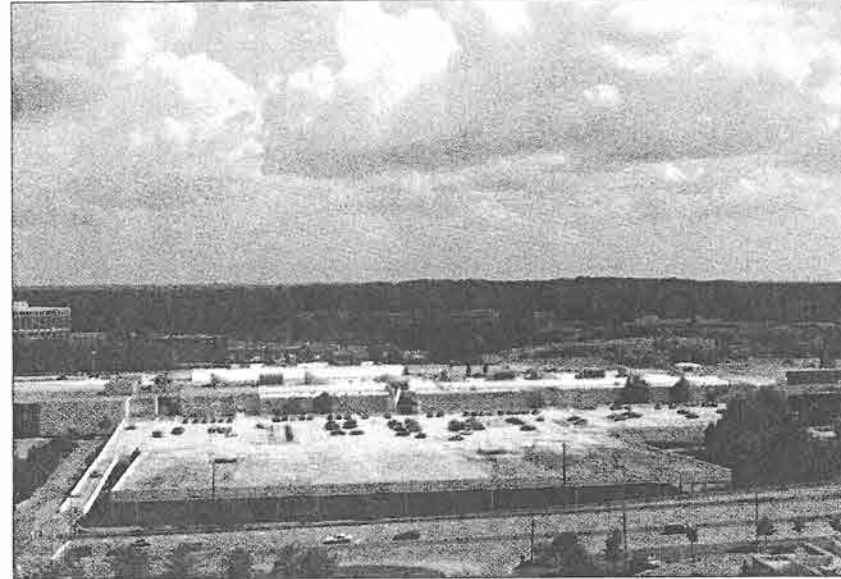
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DURHAM

In the Eddie Bauer apparel store in South Square mall last weekend, the young woman behind the sales counter volunteered the news. We're getting a new store, she reported. A better one, bigger and busier. Oh, no, not here at South Square. We're going to the new mall, to Southpoint.

That kind of optimism is rippling around South Square's sales forces these days, as Eddie Bauer and other upscale tenants sign on to join Hudson Belk and JC Penney, the old mall's longtime anchors, in the exodus to Southpoint.

The new mall, under construction five miles away on Interstate 40, will be nearly twice the size, and it will draw shoppers from Chapel Hill and Cary as well as Durham. With big new stores like Nordstrom and Hecht's luring crowds, business for everyone should boom. If you're in retail, there's no brighter mecca than a brand new mega mall.



Meanwhile, not much will be left at South Square. The owners of Durham's original enclosed multilevel mall could sell, but no one is buying, and even they concede that Southpoint's approval last year doomed their mall as a mainstream shopping center. After 25 years, South Square has to change. But to what?

For three days later this month, a collection of consultants, planners, designers and mall neighbors will assemble inside the mall to try to figure out what to do with the place. South Square is about to be made an example of, because the dilemma of one aging suburban mall is more typical than not. One recent investment analysis of real estate trends predicts that one-fifth of the shopping malls that were operating in America in 1990 will have closed by the end of next year. Some experts think the number of failing malls is even higher. In Durham, South Square is the problem. In Raleigh,

it's North Hills. These catalysts for suburban sprawl suddenly are victims of it, suffering as subsequent development takes people ever farther out of town and fuels new malls that will lure business from the older malls just as they, in their prime, lured trade from downtowns.

What is left at places like South Square and North Hills is a form of suburban blight: vast acres of little-used parking, cracked concrete and crumbling asphalt, peeling paint, and boarded up shops, usually in the center of fully developed commercial zones that grew up around them. In South Square's case, office buildings, strip shopping centers, auto dealerships, stand-alone retail stores, apartments and motels all followed the mall into the southern side of Durham in the 1970s and '80s.

Is it possible that the mall, its first life exhausted, could be reshaped to become a new center of activity in the community it spawned? Could some of its

790,000 square feet of buildings be adapted for offices, and others removed to open up "streets" and turn the inward-focused mall outward? (This, in fact, is one aim of present-day mall design. New malls like Southpoint and Triangle Town Center in North Raleigh are laid out like villages, providing sheltered shopping but also open avenues for circulating, places for congregating, and more eating and entertainment options than older malls.)

Interest in South Square's future has grown substantially over the past year, leading to this month's symposium, "Reinventing the Mall." Charles Bohl, an urban studies researcher from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is organizing the conference with a grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem. Durham Area Designers, a voluntary group of architects and other professionals, has arranged a two-day design charrette, and the mall's owners, despite the risk of raising public expectations at a time when they need financially viable alternatives, have offered a space to meet and work.

All of this comes out of hope that, since South Square has to change, it can change for the better; that it can become something more than a flea market or outlet center or otherwise low-rent recycling of its old self.

There's even a Web site (durhamareadesigners.com) where, with the click of the mouse, you can make South Square's 50 acres of parking decks, roofs and skylights disappear, vanish. Poof! In their place appears a lawn, vast and green, surrounding a lake, shimmery and blue — a little too blue to be true. Sure enough, there's another picture. A few more clicks, and South Square becomes a tire disposal plant. Realistic? No. Provocative? Yes. That's the point.

"Reinventing the Mall: A Symposium and Design Forum" will be Sept. 29 - Oct. 1 at South Square Mall. More information is available on the internet at www.durhamareadesigners.com or from Steve Gaddis at Michael Hining Architects, 682-2870.

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