

Empty 'big box' buildings can be re-filled

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Bardstown native explains how other communities have opened the lids

Bardstown will soon be dealt a double-blow in abandoned "big box" buildings -- large warehouse-styled grocery stores. When the Wal-Mart Supercenter opens this summer on KY 245 the current Wal-Mart will become the "old" Wal-Mart; and when the Winn-Dixie closes, also on KY 245, Bardstown could be faced with two empty and unattractive monolithic buildings right across the street from each other.

Julia Christensen, a Bardstown native attending Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York, led a discussion seminar Wednesday night on how other communities have used the empty "boxes" rather than let them sit empty.

During her spring break, Christensen took a tour of the east coast, visiting communities with re-used Wal-Marts, K-Marts, Winn-Dixies, and other formerly empty buildings. This summer she is continuing her exploration of the "big box" phenomenon by taking a cross-county trip. By the end, she plans to catalog the re-used stores by producing a video documentary and travel book.

Christensen became interested in the idea when a former Wal-Mart building in Bardstown was torn down to make way for the Nelson County Justice Center. Seeing how long the building was empty and how the land was finally used made Christensen wonder about other communities and their uses of old, empty buildings.

Through her research, Christensen discovered "big boxes" have only a 5- to 7-year lifespan in their first location. And when the company, be it Wal-Mart, K-Mart or some other brand of store, decides to stretch its legs in any given community, it's not a question of a building expansion.

"Generally when this happens, they don't build on to the old building, they build a new building," Christensen said.

The old buildings pile up to the sum of about 200 per year from Wal-Mart alone, Christensen said. Of those buildings, Wal-Mart resells 70-75 percent, she said, "so the buildings are be used by someone for something."

All across the county, old "boxes" are being turned into hospitals, schools, churches, museums and many of other things. But while looking at the new purpose, it is still easy to see from where the building came.

"A lot the buildings that I've been to, the exterior is really the last thing to be renovated," Christensen said. "The inside is renovated first for function sake and the outside of a lot of these buildings still looks like it did when it was a grocery store."

Grace Fellowship, an east coast church holding services in an old grocery store, was one of the buildings Christensen toured while on spring break. Since moving into the "big box" the church congregation has doubled to around 2,000 people and now has five services a week.

Another "big box" visited by Christensen had been turned into a fitness center.

"I actually went to the spa and got a massage," Christensen said. "I asked the masseuse, 'Where was this when it was a grocery store?' And he told me we were in the produce section."

The facility boasts a full gym, three swimming pools and a physical therapy center associated with the Princeton Medical Center.

As her trip continued, Christensen made her way to a K-Mart turned flea market. The K-Mart occupied the space from 1987-1991 -- the flea market, which houses more than 100 vendors, has been in the building since 1991.

"So the flea market has outlived the K-Mart now by many years," Christensen said.

One of the most interesting uses Christensen saw was a former department store morphed to fit an elementary school. Sugar Creek Charter Elementary School in Charlotte, N.C., is home to 500 students and 56 teachers. The outside of the building still looks a lot like a grocery store, Christensen said, but the inside looks like a school. Sugar Creek has room for future expansion, she said -- only half of the space available in the old K-Mart building is currently in use.

"The principal took me over to the half that isn't being used yet, and she actually said to me while we were looking at this empty space, she said, 'Look at all the hope here,'" Christensen said.

This summer, as Christensen continues her cross-country trek, she will visit more "big box" churches, schools, medical centers, and she will make her way to completely unique store conversions -- including a SPAM museum and the Musician's Friend warehouse, the largest of its kind.

Christensen has no agenda for her documentary other than to show the "big boxes" and the communities that had found a way to use them.

For Bardstown and the two "big boxes" that will soon become vacant, there are possibilities to fill them in the same way as other communities.

When 80 area residents were polled as to where a YMCA should go, if the powers that be decide to bring one to Nelson County, the No. 1 answer was "the old Wal-Mart," Nelson County Economic Development Agency president Kim Huston said.

Areas with empty "boxes" have been eager to re-use the buildings, Christensen said. And when re-filled with useful purpose, they become a part of what defines the community.

"It's been really an interesting point in all the buildings I've visited," she said. "People are really enthusiastic about how they're breathing life and making this building into something new.

"Usually when you think of a building, it's something that grows out of the town's needs and architecturally it reflects the style of the town," she added. "And this building is sort of the same thing, in every town across America. And sort of after the fact, the community goes in and colors it in with their needs."