



Talking Heads

Alex Salazar, AIA and Jennifer Nye, AIA, LEED AP, Salazar Architect

Transforming a Mall Into Mixed-Use Housing *By Darryl Hicks*

Could bankrupt shopping malls lying dormant throughout the country offer new opportunities for affordable housing?

Some experts have proposed that malls be transformed into “affordable housing campuses” that feature housing, workspaces, health centers, daycare and schools, job centers, grocery stores and restaurants. In other words, a structure where you can sleep, work, eat, shop and learn all under one roof.

It’s a radical idea. Then again, radical ideas are the only way we’ll ever provide adequate housing for every American household who needs it.

I devoted this month’s column to find out whether this notion of converting malls to housing is folly or worth exploring. We selected, as our test case, the Lloyd Center shopping mall in Portland, OR and asked local architects Alex Salazar, AIA, and Jennifer Nye, AIA, LEED AP of Salazar Architect for their insights.

Salazar Architect is one of a few private practices in the United States specialized in Community Design, an established field that developed out of the civil rights movement and has had a resurgence since the 2000s. The firm creates equitable participatory processes, focus groups, workshops and open houses to gain community input and make meaningful, inspiring places.

Lloyd Center was built in 1960 but conceived as early as 1923. According to Wikipedia, the mall was named after southern Californian oil company executive Ralph B. Lloyd, who wished to build an area of self-sufficiency that included stores and residential locations. However, the mall wasn’t built until 37 years later, due to major events, such as the Great Depression, World War II and Portland’s conservative anti-development attitude.

Tax Credit Advisor asked Salazar and Nye for their ideas on redeveloping the Lloyd Center and also how COVID-19 has changed the way they think about designing affordable housing.

Tax Credit Advisor: *Journalist Lawrence Wright recently wrote that historically pandemics are followed by significant social change. As a result of COVID-19, what changes do you anticipate in building design and usage?*



Alex Salazar



Jennifer Nye

Alex Salazar: Single-family housing may experience a revival as we hear anecdotal reports in the press of people wanting to move back to the suburbs. Detached Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) might become more important. Larger areas where people can get fresh air while safely distancing might become more desirable. We’re starting to rethink the way we design building interiors. Can we reduce the number of corridors? Will we want to avoid elevators and have more walk-up flats? How do you zone multifamily buildings so that folks don’t have to mix? Can a building be broken down into smaller elements where people can more safely live without having to pass each other? (Note: Detached ADUs are a second dwelling located in the backyard, not attached to the main house. It can be a backyard cottage or a tiny house, for example.) Within apartments, we’re starting to think about safe entries that serve as a mud-room to clean up before getting farther into the space and prioritizing a workspace/nook inside also seems like a good idea if there is budget to do so. Anyone with five-year-old kids, like me, knows the complexity of holding Zoom calls without a real office space, so having a dedicated area would be very helpful!

Jennifer Nye: I think what’s also important is access to jobs and their proximity to housing. This allows renters to become less reliant on transit. Portland has reduced the frequency of transit through its neighborhoods during COVID, so it takes much longer to get to where you need to be.



TCA: *With workers getting used to working at home and shoppers getting used to buying online, do you foresee changes in usage and design of office buildings and stores? And can these be new sites for affordable housing?*

JN: It's possible that the "big box" retailers will go by the wayside or that we'll see fewer of them. Reusing them for something else is very likely. People will rethink how they use office space and how much space they need. Individual workspaces may become shared spaces with more of a focus on the collaborative experience at the office and splitting time working from home. Office spaces convert better to affordable housing much easier than stores. A lot of it has to do with the layout of the plumbing and access to daylight.

AS: I would add that offices currently have a lot of rent expenses for basically warehousing computers. Companies that can work remotely will get used to it, as we are, and that will put pressure on reducing the office footprint.

With fewer people commuting into work and using less space in the building, I think there are large, beneficial ripple effects on the environment.

TCA: *Let's look at a shopping mall, for example. Is that a viable site for an affordable housing development with other support services?*

AS: The short answer is yes. The mall we selected, Lloyd Center, is more of an urban mall. It's in a central part of Portland, just outside of downtown but surrounded by active neighborhoods. There's a real vibrancy in the area with amenities and businesses surrounding the site. It's easy to imagine a new housing development fitting in. It's existing conditions, internal workings and nearby streets need to be carefully studied. I walked through the area and concluded it's a three by nine city block area. The city grid basically stops at the mall. This is a real opportunity. We're talking roughly 33 acres of potential development. It's a real opportunity to rethink what can go in the

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Existing Lloyd Center mall, which is surrounded by parking lots and structures that cut off the surrounding neighborhood from access to Holladay Park.



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Renovate the Lloyd Center into two commercial core buildings and create new housing sites around the perimeter with a central green space that reconnects the neighborhood to Holladay Park.

neighborhood, not just housing but any kind of office or commercial activity. Another major question is whether adaptive reuse is possible, or whether it's a tear down or something in between? That is the real question. How viable are these options? But, in general, it has huge potential. A lot of the parking is not required. The property is located right up against a major transit line that goes downtown and there are also bus lines, so it is an optimal space.

TCA: *What does Lloyd Center have going for it that would lend itself to being converted to affordable housing? Clearly there's enough space, but what other favorable factors architecturally do you see?*

JN: I think the interior court is probably the best part of the mall. In the 80s, the owners covered the ceiling in glass, which provides a lot of sunlight but protection from our frequent rain. The small retail spaces that face the court should remain. Some of the big box retail store spaces

could be demolished and redeveloped into affordable housing. One or two of the big box spaces could be reused as a community center.

TCA: *Let's say we want housing similar to a Vegas megahotel model, with everything a resident may need under one roof. How would an architect begin to conceive this? I am curious where you would assign everything. Would the housing units go into the large open spaces that run south to north, or in the smaller spaces running west to east where the retail stores are currently located?*

JN: The hard part about retail space is that it has a deep shape with little window opportunity. Reusing retail for housing is difficult. Retail would convert more easily to open-court spaces. We talked about bringing educational uses into the mall space to compliment the housing. That could be built in the parking and big box areas. We need

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Tear down the Lloyd Center and create better sized city blocks with housing over commercial uses and reconnect the neighborhood to Holladay Park.

to create some sort of north-south connection through the mall to help stitch the neighborhoods back together. One of the biggest issues with the Lloyd Center as a mall is that it's a barrier for connectivity north/south to the transit. You'd want to figure out how to rebuild some of that connection.

AS: To bridge on what Jen is saying, in this particular case there's a real need to think through that north/south connection and consider a tear-down model. The site is a long horizontal area. I did a quick calculation and the north/south direction is about 700 feet long, and the east-west direction is about five or six times that distance. If the north-south streets extended through the mall and were lined with commercial space, then it would result in roughly 400,000 square feet of commercial space at grade with the possibility of lots of housing above. That's not bad considering that the mall that exists today has only 1.2 million square feet of usable space. It's an interesting conundrum whether the economics work to convert the

existing property to affordable housing or just tearing everything down and starting over. Maybe there's a hybrid model, as Jen suggested, to treat the perimeter as housing sites and maintain some of the core for commercial activity. I think anybody would want to look at both models and see if there's a hybrid mix of the two.

TCA: So you're suggesting a partial demolition/rehab approach?

AS: Right. Allow some or all of the north/south streets, that stop at the perimeter of the site, to come through the development. Use these new streets/pedestrian open-space connections and line them with commercial uses. It would reconnect the neighborhood and create a lot of commercial space that's open to the outside fresh air and light. Most of the year it's wet and rainy, so there's a fine line between how much indoor and outdoor commercial uses one would want.

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TCA: *What are the rezoning issues in attempting such a conversion? What other civic obstacles might pop up?*

JN: The Lloyd Center mall area is zoned in such a way that there would be no obstacles. It would be more of a civic obstacle. Portland is very supportive of affordable housing, but the mall itself serves as an important social space for the Black community. The surrounding neighborhood has been damaged by the construction of highways and civic buildings. Being sensitive to how the building is currently being used and making sure it's maintained or is integrated into what is built in the future would be highly important. It's a place where people hang out and socialize. It would be important for the design team to figure out how those social spaces can be constructed to be comfortable and welcoming.

TCA: *What are some of the savings of rethinking an existing structure as opposed to building a new one from ground up? And are there unique additional expenses?*

JN: There are seismic upgrades that would likely be triggered by a project of this size. There would have to be some studies done on what structures are worth saving. It can get expensive to adaptively reuse a project and make the necessary upgrades to the foundation, structure and roof. Then there's the sustainability component of being able to reuse a structure and not sending all of that stuff to a landfill or to be recycled.

TCA: *I understand that Lloyd Center was rehabilitated 30 years ago. What upgrades would be necessary if we were to convert the mall to an affordable housing campus?*

JN: There would definitely need to be structural upgrades and the mechanical systems would likely need to be replaced. Especially now with COVID-19, there's a higher focus on air quality and the volume of air going through spaces. **TCA**

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