INTRODUCTION

Palaces become churches, churches become museums, and museums become corporate office buildings. Looking out my window, I can see an old brick factory that has evolved into an apartment building full of "lofts," a vacated gas station that currently operates as a Chinese food restaurant, a performance venue in what was once a camera shop. Adaptive reuse is happening all around us, as it has been since people began constructing this built environment upon the Earth. A stroll around your neighborhood will reveal adaptive reuse on most every block. Each building has its own personal timeline, its wealth of forgotten histories and contexts, each use somehow informing the next while altering the building in its wake. The structures we build have many stories to tell, generations of uses, scores of leases or deeds, an impressive share of successful enterprises, and a share of failed businesses too.

The dictionary describes reuse as "the act of using again in a different way after reclaiming or reprocessing." The first part of the definition undoubtedly infers an action, since the word "using" most literally refers to doing something. But the words "reclaiming" and "reprocessing" are exciting in a different way, because they also refer to a conceptual act—a decision, an imaginative, creative moment. Reclaiming a structure, or reprocessing it, is an action that also must occur in the minds of the people who are enacting the reuse. In other words, the building itself does not necessarily have to change nearly as drastically as its image has to change in the imaginations of the beholders.

This book is about the reuse of vacant "big box" stores, the large, freestanding, warehouse-like buildings that have become prominent in the built landscape since the mid-twentieth century. The reuse of these buildings seems unlikely, with their directly

corporate associations and their aesthetically bland hulk. The buildings exude an ephemeral quality, imparted by the frequency with which corporations vacate the structures, and yet the deadweight of an empty big box building does not simply go away. Thousands of empty big boxes can be found right now all across the country, a vast network of abandoned construction, stretching from sea to shining sea.

In the twenty-first century, communities across the United States are adapting these buildings for new uses, just as people have always reused the buildings in our midst. It is educational—and quite enlightening—to attempt to place the big box reuse phenomenon in the continuous timeline of development in the United States, contemplating not only where the phenomenon has come from, but also where it is leading, and what the future landscape holds. Communities continuously reconnect their needs and activity flow to the landscape, and by subsuming these abandoned big box buildings, they attempt to make them useful within their lives after the retailer has vacated the premises. The result is that we are beginning to see museums, community centers, churches, and other civic groups moving into adapted abandoned corporate big box structures.

This book explores big box reuse on three interrelated levels: (1) the pragmatic and practical act of how these buildings are actually reused; (2) the reuse of the infrastructure that supports these buildings and their global retail operation, including the parking lot, surface streets leading to the lot, and in fact the national highway system as it has been harnessed to support a global network of big box buildings; and (3), perhaps most important, we will explore the conceptual act of the reuse of big boxes. This last aspect focuses directly on the people who have reprocessed or reclaimed the space, leading to their decision-making processes as they overtake a big box to fulfill their needs. In other words, this book is every bit as much about people as it is about buildings.

Each of the chapters in this book is about a nonretail site (with the exception of chapter 10, which is about a chain of flea markets in a string of vacated Wal-Mart stores) that once operated as a Kmart or a Wal-Mart store, two corporations that have made a drastic impact on the global economy. Throughout the course of this research project, I have documented the reuse of big boxes developed by a number of companies, including Ames, The Home Depot, and Best Buy. All of these corporations are contributing to the escalation of America's big-boxed landscape. The decision to focus only on buildings developed by Wal-Mart and Kmart in this book is because Wal-Mart and Kmart buildings have drastically changed the trajectory of development in our cities and towns, in that they have historically been the most commonly constructed and abandoned retail big boxes throughout the United States. The extensive vacancy of these stores means

that there is more spatial potential in the structures developed by Wal-Mart and Kmart than by the other big box developers. By examining the reuse of these sites, we get a glimpse of what our future might look like as we continue to adapt these buildings into our everyday nonretail lives. We also cull a compelling portrait of this moment in the development of our built environment, which inevitably speaks of our culture, of our activities, of our lives. There is a cultural shift at hand, as groups such as schools and senior resource centers "supersize" and find big box buildings more and more useful for their own operation.

Infinite paradoxes are embedded in the process of reusing a big box, each touched upon by the people in these stories, through their words and actions. First there is the paradox of how communities in the United States are recontextualizing this corporation-specific development through primarily nonretail adaptation and reuse. Environmentally, big box reuse offers quite a paradoxical quagmire; despite the blatant environmentally harmful construction of a big box building, reuse is a powerful tool in the fight against the increasing dangers of sprawl. For every building that is reused, another building does not go up. And then there is the overarching cultural phenomenon: each case study in this book tells the story of a big box reuse site that the renovators deem "successful," "creative," and "resourceful." And, indeed, as you read the case studies, you will probably agree. Humans are incredibly resourceful when there is a need at hand, and it is no surprise that groups of creative people across the United States are successfully turning vacant greyfields into vibrant nodes of community activity. But questions persist: Is this what we want our future landscape to look like? Schools, hospitals, churches, museums, and flea markets, all within the same structure, built by the same handful of corporations, right around the turn of the millennium?

We very often engage in critical discussion about salvaging historic buildings in our midst, waning downtowns, and important historical structures. There are also organizations currently attempting to maintain buildings that are perhaps still new enough to fall through the cracks of historic preservation initiatives, such as the International Working Party for the Documentation and Conservation of the Buildings, Sites, and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement (DoCoMoMo). But by considering constructions of the very recent past that often go unnoticed, like strip malls and retail centers, we stumble upon hidden histories, unseen forces that are altering the landscape without critical thought or collective foresight. Examining the big box building provides a wealth of information that will help us steer the future of our landscape with more informed decision-making processes.

The yearly construction of hundreds of big boxes has been so encompassing that it is hard to conceive of where they came from, who owns them, who designs them, and who is responsible for them. Big box buildings are most commonly associated with retailers who developed the industry of one-stop shopping—Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Target among them. But these retailers are not the only corporations to construct big boxes. A myriad of companies have followed suit, supersizing into the big box typology, including the more specifically merchandized "category killers" (like The Home Depot, PetSmart, Barnes & Noble, and Staples), grocers (like Kroger's, Albertsons, Trader Joe's, and Whole Foods Market), warehouse clubs (like Costco and Sam's Club), and outlets (like Big Lots). The twenty-first century retail districts of the United States are loaded with big box buildings. The onslaught of these structures has increased continually since 1962, the year of the first Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Target stores. Despite big box–related unrest among a growing number of communities throughout the United States, big boxes continue to loom in our cities and towns, in the countryside, and off the exits of highways. Big box issues relate to the goals and relationships of a myriad of developers, government officials, city council members, and citizens in each and every big box implementation. In its vacancy, the big box exhibits far-reaching impact of those initial goals. The case studies that follow this introduction point to a myriad of impacts that a big box building creates for its host community. Most of these implications were certainly not considered when the retailer (and the developers, government officials, city council members, and citizens) first approved the construction. It is often difficult to know which of the parties responsible for initiating the big box is responsible for dealing with its vacancy, or these long-lasting effects—impacts that are revealed throughout the stories in this book.

It is also difficult, apparently, to even define the big box. At the beginning of my research, I interviewed people across the country about what a "big box" actually is, and got a huge range of definitions from interviewees from place to place. The specifications of a big box vary among locales so that ultimately big box definitions (and, therefore, big box laws) are strictly regional and local. For instance, in some towns a big box building is a retailer with more than 50,000 square feet of retail space, and so big box laws apply to any store that fits that bill. The next town up the road might have a definition with different specifications so that a big box building is a 200,000+-square-foot building, and so their big box laws apply only to those larger structures. Some towns define a big box as only Wal-Mart stores, or as only Kmart stores, so that particular retailers evade building codes other retailers cannot evade, in the same locale. The fact that the building itself

has such a varied definition makes the structure difficult to regulate or track on a national level, since planners and city councils are simply talking about something different in different places. Big box retailers do not make attempts to clear up these ad hoc definitions, since they find freedom in the chaos.

At this point, an accurate definition of a big box is possible: a large, freestanding, one-story warehouse building with one main room, ranging from 20,000 to 280,000 square feet, used initially for retail purposes.

Because of the lack of national regulations or standardization regarding big boxes, the buildings have appeared with varying frequency across the country. This is partly because the initial business plans of Wal-Mart and Kmart were a little different in terms of their market, in that Wal-Mart was trying to cater to a rural market, and Kmart filled in the big box gaps in larger towns and urban areas. Wal-Mart's rural market mission was to bring bargain items to towns whose populations could not access such goods without driving a distance to bigger cities. This is a crucial point in understanding the reliance on the big boxes that has developed in rural areas, especially in the South and the Midwest, where Wal-Mart staked its initial market in the early 1960s. Accordingly, the original Wal-Mart buildings from the 1960s and 1970s are generally found today in rural areas of the southern and midwestern parts of America, orbiting around Bentonville, Arkansas, Wal-Mart's headquarters. Kmart, now based in Troy, Michigan, initially had a stronger presence in larger towns and smaller cities, and even in larger cities as well. (Kmart merged with Sears Holding Corporation on March 24, 2005, and it is now controlled by that company.) Kmart is still the only big box retailer with a presence in Manhattan (although category killers have become present in Manhattan, including Staples, The Home Depot, and a Barnes & Noble on nearly every other block).

It is important to note that, across the board, big box buildings are generally not being vacated because the companies have lost business in a certain location, or because the business model has not worked. Rather, big box buildings are being vacated because the retailers are expanding to larger structures, usually within a mile of the original structure. This is especially true of Wal-Mart. At the time of this writing, the Wal-Mart Real Estate website (www.walmartrealty.com) lists 253 Wal-Mart-owned empty buildings available for lease, all ready for future use (exhibiting the Wal-Mart corporation's land use power, as one of the country's largest commercial landlords). Twenty-six of these buildings are in the state of Texas, fifteen are available in Tennessee, thirteen in Oklahoma, twenty-one in Ohio, and sixteen in Illinois. There are no buildings listed in the states of Vermont, Maine, Oregon, Montana, or Washington, again, exhibiting the

regions of the country most affected by this phenomenon. This list does not include the hundreds of vacated Wal-Mart retail buildings owned and controlled by countless other real estate companies across the country, only those owned and controlled by Wal-Mart. And of course, these are only vacated Wal-Mart buildings, so when we include Kmart, The Home Depot, Kroger's, and so forth, we are clearly looking at thousands of empty buildings from coast to coast. You can probably think of a few in your immediate region, right now.

For the most part, people are not happy about the existence of the vacant sites, and in fact, most people are utterly confused. Over and over again I have heard this question: "What do we do with that building, how do we even begin to think about it?" When a community is first dealt the blow of a vacated big box, residents' eyes do not light up with visions of a new school, hospital, or go-kart track being fitted into the structure. Townspeople usually agree that the empty building is a terrible hole, an eyesore, even though they may have been ambivalent when the retailer had first moved to town. Increasingly, towns are exercising their right to force the corporations to build retail structures with adaptive reuse in mind, so that renovation is simplified—and, of course, towns do have the option of simply banning the store from coming into the community in the first place. Increasingly, cities, counties, states, are making new laws to manage the entrance of big box retailers into their communities. In July 2007, the state of Maine, for instance, signed what is being called the first state law that would prevent big box retailers from descending upon towns without significant proof that their presence would in no way be economically hazardous to the community's existing businesses.

Anti–big box legislation is constantly still voted down in states other than Maine; in California a similar law was shut down simultaneously in the summer of 2007. The number of big box stores has increased exponentially yearly since 1962—the big box issue is waxing rather than waning—despite widespread unrest over their presence.

Take a look at Wal-Mart's track record, as shown in table I.1. Through the massive addition of supercenters rather than discount stores (a jump from 721 to 1,980 supercenters between 2000 and 2006), Wal-Mart's square footage has grown exponentially. For most every supercenter that is built, a discount store is vacated, left behind. The growth rate of the big box stores, despite unrest and fights against retailers, especially Wal-Mart, is a clear sign that the battle is more complex than simply a fight between retailer and consumer. This book looks beyond the direct relationship of the consumer and the corporation, and into a myriad of dynamics surrounding the big box land use issues as they are happening on the ground, in our communities. Exploring how communities meet the

	DISCOUNT STORES	SUPERCENTERS	SAM'S CLUB	NEIGHBORHOOD MARKETS	UNITS OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES	TOTAL WAL-MART STORES	PERCENTAGE INCREASE
1975	104					104	
1980	276					276	265%
1985	745		11			756	273%
1990	1402		123			1525	202%
1995	1990	143	428		346	2561	168%
2000	1801	721	463		1004	3989	156%
2006	1209	1980	567	100	2285	5289	132%

TABLE 1.1 Wal-Mart building types and the number of each, 1975–2006

challenge of reusing the big box leads us to understand how big box buildings affect our lives as community members, both locally and globally—not only as shoppers, but as students, educators, doctors, senior citizens, artists, drivers, curators, pastors, and priests. This book focuses on the reuse of these buildings and their infrastructure as a means of looking at the how big box issues bleed into our civic lives in the United States once a retailer has left behind a structure.

So far, activists and lawmakers are focused mainly on curbing the economic impact of the big box retailers, the first clear impact of such global power. But the fact is, there are many issues affected by the presence of big box buildings, beyond the consumer-related impacts.

For instance, it is crucial that we consider the environmental impact of the structures that house the stores. This environmental impact is first apparent at the site of the big box itself, with its acres of impermeable parking lots and rooftops, both of which cause liquid to run off into surrounding fields and streams. Implementation of the structure

simply removes miles of green space. The balance of the immediate ecosystem is disrupted, as fish fight to live in polluted creeks and birds begin to nest in the rafters of the big box. But the environmental impact affects more than just the land directly impacted by the stores. Big box buildings are entirely reliant on the auto-centricity of life in the United States, and the sites are practically inaccessible and impossible to navigate without the use of an automobile. The stores are inoperable without this connection to the road, to the highway, which leads to the distribution center, where truckloads of merchandise are brought from the boats at the seashores, every hour of every day. A global system of traverse is carved out on the land, with big box buildings acting as the nuts and bolts that hold the web together. Likewise, the big box is always made accessible among the local roads within the town, offering convenience to the car-driving consumer. This harnessing and cultivation of the car culture is a crucial component in the environmental crisis we are currently facing. In fact, the system is so reliant on our current transportation system that if gasoline were taken out of the big box equation altogether (without any comparable fuel alternative), the entire system would self-destruct.

Another related major concern is that big box land use restrictions are far-reaching, controlling land long into the future, so that land use decisions being made now regarding big boxes will have a powerful effect on how American towns are developed and shaped in the future. Often, big box retailers sign leases on land for decades or centuries. Thousands of empty buildings will never be torn down, simply because the retailer will continue to pay the mortgage in order to keep the building empty. An empty building staves competition off of the parcel, which is one contributing factor to the phenomenon of the empty big box.

Maintaining vacant sites is part of the giant land conquest going on among big box retailers. When a big box retailer shuts the doors of one building and moves across the street to a new building, it is generally true that it is because it is actually cheaper for the company to build an entirely new store from scratch than it would be to interrupt business at the old building in order to renovate. But there is also the fact that when the retailer closes shop and builds across the street, it has just doubled its land use control in the area. Empty big box buildings can be thought of as products that act as placeholders for real estate. Often, big box retailers include rules in the deeds of buildings that determine the use of the space in the future too. I visited a church in a renovated Wal-Mart building where the church administrators mentioned that the deed of the property clearly states that the building may not be used as a Kmart building for one hundred years in the future.

A library, on the other hand, is not in direct competition (yet) with Wal-Mart. So it may move in and do whatever it wants to the building. The library is not an unlikely reuser of a big box building, and in this research, civic institutions have emerged as the innovative renovators of big box buildings, ten of which you will read about in this book.

The ten case studies presented here are divided into four parts. Part I: Center is about big box reuse in terms of gravity, regarding city infrastructure and organization of the community's activity. Although big boxes are generally constructed in what is considered to be the "outskirts" of town, the stories in this section look at how these buildings have become a "center" over time. Part II: Network contemplates the larger network of big box buildings, and how parallel big box sites can actually be viewed as networked nodes, especially within the current context of globalization and digital culture. Big boxes do not just stand on their own, but rather are a part of a multisited corporate event, and the networked nature may also be absorbed by culture. Part III: Design presents examples of design issues that come up within the reuse of the big box, causing us to question how the design of these buildings affects culture, and how this affected culture impacts the redesign of the buildings. Part IV: Future is about the future fabric of the built environment in relation to big box buildings.

The case studies were all documented on-site, and these stories were told to me at the "ground level" by a variety of community members in each town I visited. Stories are ephemeral, and, perhaps like the very uses that operate in the walls of these structures, stories are not forever. For that reason, let this book be a snapshot, a glimpse of a moment in the development of the United States. But do not assume that this moment is isolated, and that it does not have far-reaching implications. Big box reuse is a cultural, architectural, urban, and encompassing phenomenon—possibly an unavoidable wave of the imminent global future.

At this point, humans have fully wrapped the Earth in the fabric of the built environment, draping the planet in buildings, roads, parks, wires, and towers. Constructions upon the Earth hold spatial memory of activities past, built markers of the events of human history encased in cement, stone, wood, steel, and glass. This built environment can be examined like a timeline, a reflection, built proof of human activity. By examining the evidence, we gather an insightful portrait of culture.

We are what we build.

Constructions on the Earth are also a great instigator of change. What we build perpetuates a feedback loop, determining activities of the future. Altered activities cause buildings to shed their intended purposes, and they take on new uses, they acquire new

memories, new associations. Dirt paths are paved, cobblestone streets are preserved, and highways are carved out of horse trails, determining how people navigate the manufactured exo-surface of the planet. Communities ultimately alter their routines to align with the built environment that surrounds them.

And so, what we build determines who we are.

Reuse, as an act, infers three tenses of time. In order to reuse a building, we must consider the past: where we have come from and how the building became situated in our environment. Reuse also makes us aware of our present decisions, the needs at hand, as we reprocess and reclaim the structure for its new use. But most important, reuse—and I hope, this book—will cause us to think about the future. In the future, archaeologists will look to the built environment of our time for clues about our activities and culture, just as we have looked to the ancient built environment to access histories past. These future historians will notice a period at the turn of the millennium when thousands upon thousands of practically identical buildings were constructed simultaneously in the United States.

What do we want our built environment to tell them about who we are?