

URBAN RETAIL

INSIDE, OUTSIDE AND ALL AROUND

Vibrant. Busy. Loud. Colorful. Fun. Messy. Adjectives often used to describe successful urban retail. This retail is an important component of a healthy community. It makes for an exciting and enlivened pedestrian environment which meets the needs of the community – people that live, work, stay and play in the area. But how do you define urban retail? Actually, it might best be defined by what it is not: Urban retail is not strip shopping centers, community shopping centers or malls. Rather, urban retail is clusters of stores, offering neighborhood goods and services, accessible by surrounding residential areas within walking distance and often drawing from a wider market area.



populations, metropolitan areas require associated infrastructure and urban retail is a key piece to meet the growing needs of the citysumer.

Urban retail options continue to expand and getting urban retail right is important to the consumer, to the retailer and to the community. A recent article by ULI highlights the changes that Walmart, Safeway and other grocers are making – incorporating pedestrian-friendly design, smaller formats, and a variety of product type – to fit within the urban fabric.

Arlington, Virginia, located across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., is one such metropolitan area which has seen increased population growth and has managed its infrastructure needs well. In planning and smart growth circles, Arlington is often considered a standard bearer: In fact, Clarendon and Wilson Boulevards received the prestigious “Great Places in America: Streets” designation by the American Planning Association. Many elements foster a great street and one crucial part is successful retail. However, recently, a retail task force was convened by the Arlington Economic Development Commission to address retail in Arlington – specifically urban retail – to address retail policies.



Recent census numbers indicate that people are moving to places that had higher density levels as of 2000, responding to the productivity advantages associated with proximity to other people (Glaeser, 2011). Recognizing this continued growth of population in urban areas, trendwatching.com, a consumer trends firm, coined the term “citysumers” as “urbanites...who are ever more demanding, more open-minded, but also more proud, more connected, more spontaneous and more try-out-prone, eagerly snapping up a whole host of new urban goods, services, experiences, campaigns and conversations” in its February 2011 Trend Briefing. With increasing

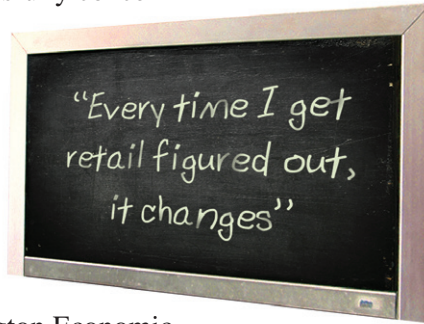
Why? As the retail task force convened, the truly dynamic nature of retail was evident in its conversations. One person aptly exclaimed that “Every time I think that I have retail figured out, it changes.” Arlington’s policies, as many policies are, were static and didn’t capture the changing dynamic of retail. Whereas Arlington’s land use policies have successfully concentrated development along Metro corridors, the “retail everywhere” policy – the requirement for first floor retail in nearly all new development – has inadvertently resulted in producing marginal retail spaces in problematic locations (Arlington Economic Development Commission, 2009).

But the “retail everywhere” policy wasn’t the only concern that was voiced. As staff listened to the retail task force, we quickly realized that there was “room for improvement” – changes to that could take Arlington from a good retail environment to a great retail environment. In a research paper, “Room for Improvement: A Supplement to



Room for Improvement examines how well-meaning but inflexible County policies have inadvertently produced second-rate retail spaces.

the Retail Task Force Report, ‘Boutiques, Bistros & Banks’,” staff highlighted elements in policies, process and implementation “related to location, signage, storefront design, public realm and parking [which] have hindered the ability of many retail businesses – particularly small, independent stores in Arlington’s urban corridors – to thrive.”



The task force and staff agreed – successful urban retail, defined by the task force as convenient, appealing, activating and sustainable, required updated policies. Numerous policies within Arlington have an influence over retail ranging from specific neighborhood plans to the Zoning Ordinance. Arlington recognizes the evolutionary nature of retail and now has increased awareness and experience about retail to better update its policies on retail. The policies should enhance economic growth for the community and foster an environment in which retailers can be successful. These updates should not be seen as a tightening or loosening of existing rules and regulations: rather, the provision of clarity and direction to best achieve successful retail.

So, how best can Arlington approach such an update? We can start by looking at the policies and how they influence retail from the inside (within a building), the outside (façade, streetscape, signs, etc.) and all around (from its location within an urban village or neighborhood to its location within the county and within the region).

Inside

Walls, floors and ceilings combine to create a space but the use within distinguishes that space. Appropriate definitions for uses envisioned on the ground floor of buildings are paramount in creating the clarity and direction for successful and sustainable retail.

Uses

Retail should be defined within a Zoning Ordinance to allow certainty for residents, developers and tenants but with enough flexibility to allow a Zoning Administrator the latitude to reflect upon the dynamic nature of retail. Surprisingly, there is no definition of retail within Arlington's policy documents. In addition to the definition of retail, other categories of uses which activate the street should be included and defined succinctly in a Zoning Ordinance. These broader definitions, rather than an extensive listing of specific uses – some of which will become archaic over time, will allow a Zoning Ordinance to remain current.



Target opened this pop-up store in a vacant lot to gain temporary access to a new market.

Categories of Use

Policy updates need to address not only the definitions but the type of defined use. The use within the space can be placed into one of four categories: permanent, substitute, temporary and interim. Each category has differing nuances ranging from types of expected uses to building codes to timing and performance requirements.

Permanent uses are those uses which would typically be defined as standard ground floor uses. Definitions would provide for:

- Retail – a space in which you can purchase an article to own
- Restaurants and food establishments
- Services – a space in which personal (e.g. hair salon) or business (e.g. copy center) services are offered.
- Cultural – a space in which cultural events or items are displayed or experienced (e.g. theaters, galleries)

Substitute uses may offer performance characteristics similar to retail in terms of interest and street activation. Specific substitute uses may include: child care centers, conference facilities, schools and other educational centers.

Temporary uses – while the space is in transition (for example between leases) – uses could include

pop-up stores, galleries, art installations, an onsite sales office or special events. Criteria should be established to guide the amount of time for such a use, set forth parking requirements and ensure compliance with all County codes.

Interim uses fall into two categories: after approval and demolition but before construction; and before changes to the area and the need for retail. Uses such as open space, vending areas or event or market staging could enliven an area after buildings have been removed but construction is not imminent. Substitute uses, as described above, or even certain residential uses may be appropriate in a project for a period of time until the area redevelops and the demand for retail is strong. However, similar to temporary uses, criteria should be established to address appropriate timing, the construction of the space, parking requirements and an appropriate trigger for the change to a permanent use.

Design

In addition to the use within the space, the space needs to be designed appropriately for retail. Ample floor-to-ceiling heights, access to service corridors for loading and trash removal, and exhaust ventilation are all needs of successful retail. As projects are developed, attention to these internal elements of retail is necessary. Often height limitations within older zoning ordinances, especially if specified as number of feet rather than number of stories, were not written to account for the taller floor-to-ceiling heights now desired for retail. Additional costs and density which may be attributed to exhaust ventilation could be overcome in how gross floor area is calculated. Updates to zoning ordinances should consider such elements to encourage best practices in the construction of retail space.

Outside

As much as the use inside helps to define a space – the exterior of the space provides the public interface. In creating a pedestrian friendly environment, particularly one with successful retail, the retail needs to look like retail. To accomplish this end, as retail changes – storefronts, signs, the face of the space – the outside needs to change. The outside needs to reflect the inside – retail shops are judged by their cover. Three policy elements – the design process, the sign ordinance and right-of-way regulations – have much influence over the outside of the space. These policies, as well as others which contribute to the exterior of the space, require review.

Design Process

Often approvals for buildings – both use and design – require legislative actions and are done in advance of construction and well in advance of any potential retail tenant. Therefore, changes to the approved façades require similar legislative action. The time and costs involved with such a change doesn't provide the flexibility to address the dynamic character of retail.

However, administrative rather than legislative review of storefronts would allow merchants to remain nimble – to catch the changes in the retail environment. Instead of explicit approval of the actual façade, the legislative authority can set forth criteria for the façade including, but not limited to:

Potential Façade Criteria

- **Materials** – ensure that high quality materials (glass, masonry, wood and metal) and finishes are used in the construction of the storefront.
- **General character** – although we want to encourage individuality within each storefront, the design should consider the façades of the building above and adjacent storefronts.
- **Fenestration** – successful retail needs to be appealing and activating. The treatment of windows and doors are important in making retail look like retail. Windows should be the predominant feature of the storefront and clear, rather than tinted, glass should be used.
- **Transparency** – in addition to having appropriate windows and doors, pedestrians walking along the street should be able to see into the space – see the merchandise or services being offered – and become potential customers. Windows should remain clear without signs or backs of display cases obstructing views into the space.

Signs

Can a retailer have too many signs? Signs are important as they can catch a potential customer's eye; provide information to potential customers; and help direct to shops that may not be on the main street. A sign can assist in a retailer's success.

Arlington is in a process of updating its Zoning Ordinance and, in recognizing the importance of signs to the community, the first section under review is signs. Arlington's definition of a sign is very broad and includes all things – either inside or outside of the space – visible from the outside,

in order to identify and locate the use to persons located outdoors. Signs, therefore, include everything from a standard sign to certain lighting to balloons. How communities define signs is very important to retailers.



Good signage is essential to create interest and drive customers to the business.

Too often development projects, in an effort to maintain uniformity, craft a comprehensive sign plan – a plan detailing all of the sign types, general placement and overall square footage for the project – prior to signing leases with retailers. As identified in “Room for Improvement,” a comprehensive sign plan submitted by developers may result in prescriptive and sometimes monotonous storefront signs. Retailers should be encouraged to express their store’s “personality” in the storefront design and signs. Developers and building owners should take care when designing a comprehensive sign plan to ensure appropriate flexibility to all retailers.

In addition to signs on the building, wayfinding signs – directing customers down a side street – may be appropriate. As an example, the City of Alexandria has been piloting a retail wayfinding program for several years. The program, started in 2008, permits restaurateurs and retailers to apply for, construct and maintain an A-Frame sign for their businesses which are located on the side streets within the central business district. The program, which sets forth specific standards and details for sign construction and placement, has been a success

for businesses and visitors alike. The city plans to adopt an ordinance in June 2011 to have the pilot program become a permanent program.

Not only do the stores and restaurants need signs to advertise once in the space but building owners and retail brokers need signs to advertise space available and to let people know what’s coming into the space. Finding the right space in the right place which is the right size and the right price can make or break the success of a retail business. Seeing available spaces helps a future retailer better understand the market and learn of the various properties available. Advertising the next new thing can create a buzz – and help the future store or restaurant when it opens its doors for the first time.

Public Realm

Items and uses within the public realm keep expanding: street trees to street furniture to vending carts to pedestrian pathways. It is space that allows for multiple interactions simultaneously. Jim Peters, Executive Director of Responsible Hospitality Institute, refers to this space as a venue for social and cultural functions. In certain areas – often the “in-between” areas – these interactions don’t need to be as robust. However, in areas in which there is a defined center of activity – perhaps envisioned as the “living room of the community” – retail needs to be a key component and needs to work. The space becomes a permeable edge of commerce.

Outdoor cafes, merchandise displays and signs can add color and vibrancy to the streetscape. Providing an easy and understandable process for the placement of tables, chairs, merchandise or signs is important. Ensuring safe and convenient access with ample sidewalk widths is imperative.

Street trees provide welcome shade, can provide for better storm water management practices, and enhance the environment. However, trees should be selected with care and be limbed carefully to ensure that signs and storefronts are not obscured.

Balance is critical. Moving forward, jurisdictions need to balance rules and regulations with the organic nature of retail. All users and uses can be accommodated through careful consideration and planning. Elements of the public realm should be complementary uses and not competing uses.

All Around

The location of retail is paramount. Retail will not go where it doesn't want to go. Or, as a corollary, retail will not be successful in places it should not be. Retail does not need to be in all places – residential and office uses can encourage, through appropriate design, the interaction of people throughout the day in an enjoyable pedestrian environment. To have successful and sustainable retail, we need to be cognizant of appropriate retail locations.

How retail comes to exist is often a litmus test as to its success. Retail can evolve organically over time – changing locations and types as community's demographics and needs change. Retail can be planned – space can be designed to accommodate retail as a community is envisioned to grow with redevelopment. Such space could be used for the interim uses or substitute uses as described above in "Inside." Retail can also be required. And, if retail is required in a location that isn't ready for retail, success, if any, will be fleeting.

Different areas have different needs. For example, Arlington's urban villages – walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods located along the Metrorail system or with planned transit and transit hubs – each have different characters and purposes which weren't specifically defined or planned. There are several key components necessary for the success and livability in each urban village: one is retail. Residents of each urban village should have access to all conventional neighborhood retail and service uses within walking distance and, importantly, must have a full size grocery store. That said, these retailers, restaurateurs and grocers

need customers from a larger trade area to ensure continued success.

Commercial streets and the neighborhood nodes also provide retail to a community. These commercial nodes and strips change over time as densities and travel patterns shift. However, these places are still important to communities and to retailers as rents may be less expensive while pedestrian and vehicular traffic remain steady – less than the urban retail but consistent. The space can offer new entrepreneurs an opportunity to go into a brick and mortar storefront to build confidence, customers and credit. Urban villages and the commercial streets and nodes have differing needs and users: they require different rules and regulations ranging from the types of signs to parking to seating and live entertainment.

In addition to the standard brick and mortar storefronts, many urban areas have seen an increase in vending carts and trucks – an element of retail



Shoppers enjoy walking between Clarendon's retail stores.

which was recently referred to as “streetail.” Streetail – although sometimes seen as a temporary or interim use – can quickly relocate to where the customer base is located, enliven spaces and provide variety and convenience to customers. Streetail exemplifies the dynamic tendencies of retail – ever changing, evolving and moving.

While not the only approach, thinking about retail from the inside, outside and all around is a systematic way to address policies, rules and regulations pertaining to retail.

Resources

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