

Reusing Vacant Retail Space



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Thousands of retail and big box stores sit empty across the country. Recent bankruptcies of Circuit City and Linens N Things, along with the downsizing of other national retail chains have created a huge surplus of vacant buildings. These empty retail shells and warehouses are difficult to sell and not ideally suited for other businesses. Below is a recent list of the number of vacancies by major retailer.

- Office Depot (126 stores)
- Dillards (26 stores)
- Home Depot (15 stores)
- Macy's (11 stores)
- KB Toys (356 stores)
- Circuit City (567 stores)
- Linens N Things (571 stores)

Architecturally, big box retail is one of the most flexible and easy to adapt building types available. Big box stores have efficient column spacing, usually around 30 feet. Ceiling heights are generous, creating a sense of spaciousness. Mechanical systems are typically simple rooftop units with ductwork that can easily be reconfigured and rerouted for new uses. Roof structures are lightweight structural steel, which can be reconfigured for skylight openings. Big box tenants typically have plenty of electrical capacity due to their high levels of lighting and cooling. These types of stores always have plenty of parking.

The before mentioned built-in flexibility offered by existing retail and big box stores makes them ideally suited for conversion into churches. Retail space is basically a blank canvas that can be easily customized by the church to create specialty spaces suited to their use. Many church congregations have been surprised at how easily retail spaces have been transformed into their new church.

The major advantage of using retail space for a church is that it is cost effective. With the high vacancy rates in the retail market, churches are finding it cheaper to buy an existing retail shell as opposed to vacant land plus the cost of construction. Total occupancy costs can be 35 to 50 percent lower than new construction when recycling an existing building. The biggest expenses will likely be in mechanical, electrical and plumbing reconfigurations, as well as life safety and code-related systems. Abatement of hazardous materials is usually not an issue, since the big box format is relatively new.

Reusing big box retail space into a new church offers many financial advantages and is only limited by imagination and creativity.

[Example Building Program: Good Shepherd Baptist Church, Petersburg VA, formally vacant K-Mart store.](#)

