
Back to School

Sometimes it takes more than borrowing a word to refashion that concept into a new era with different needs.

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Wrentham Village is a relatively new shopping center constructed off Interstate 495 (I-495) in Wrentham, Massachusetts. Its design incorporates a lot of the latest features for shopping centers. The center is advertised as a collection of factory-direct stores, in which different brands offer their merchandise directly to consumers at discount prices. In comparison to a large department store with everything under one roof, the center has dozens of smaller stores situated in shopping pods. The pods are sited in the middle of a vast parking lagoon. Access to the lagoon is easily provided by an exit off I-495, the Boston metro area's uber-beltway. As you approach the exit a sign for Wrentham Village towers over the trees in the adjacent woods and lights up the sky at night.

Inside the village, shoppers walk along modestly pleasant, nondescript pedestrian lanes lined with stores. As implied by the name, it is a village of sorts, but it is not a real village. It only has stores. But true to the village concept, the pedestrian lanes are all outside, exposed to the weather. Use of open-air

public spaces is one of the innovations of this type of discount shopping center (in contrast to an enclosed, environmentally-controlled mall). The costs of maintaining the space must be considerably less, since there are no heating and cooling bills for such common areas as walkways and plazas. The shopping pods are arranged in squares, with the interiors of the squares reserved for trucks bringing in inventory and supplies. Access to the shipping areas is via small paved alleys that connect to the main parking lagoon. The shipping areas with their loading docks and garbage bins, while not directly in the pedestrian paths, are not exactly hidden from view either. The theory behind the architecture seems to be that because it is a discount center, shoppers should expect some degree of less-than-Grade-A accommodations.

The Draw

I needed stuff, so I trekked to the village in September. This is the back-to-school period, when kids are lugged by their parents for the annual clothing resupply. The place was packed. It was impossible to get a spot near the pods in the parking lagoon, although many drivers trolled around for openings. I didn't have the patience, so I parked at the outskirts about a quarter-mile away, and made the five-minute hike across the asphalt to the edge of the shopping pods. As with the rest of the infrastructure, the parking lot design was functional and adequate — good enough to park your car, with a few trees and

some throwaway landscaping, but a sad replacement for the vast expanse of woodlands that had been cut down to provide the space.

Once in the village, I joined the hundreds of shoppers with glazed eyes shuffling from store to store. I thought of a scene from the movie, *Dawn of the Dead*, where the zombies mill around a shopping mall, buying merchandise and chewing on flesh. In keeping with the discount theme, the public spaces of the factory stores had few amenities. There were not many benches or water fountains. At one intersection of pedestrian lanes, the design provided a confusing jumble of pathways and shrub landscaping, as if the designers couldn't decide whether it was more important to make the space look nice or to funnel the shoppers away from the center and closer to the edges. The edges were where the stores were, and the object was to get the patrons to shop and spend. At one pedestrian lane intersection, there was a small overhead trellis that had no discernible function. No grape vines grew on it, and it didn't provide shade or cover from the rain. It was a functionless structure not even in keeping with the discount layout of the rest of the village.

The part of the infrastructure that seemed best developed was the signage. At any location in the village, you could see signs showing you where you were and where the other stores were. There weren't many benches to sit on to read the signs, but at least you could easily make your way from store to store.

It Takes a Village

It's interesting to compare this shopping village to its traditional New England namesake. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, small towns dotted the landscape between urban areas in New England. The traditional farming village layout included a grassy public common with surrounding residential

areas. The real Wrentham Village is not too far from the shopping center, and it is representative of this agricultural tradition. However, the real village does not offer the efficiencies provided for mass consumption that the new shopping village does. Its few stores date from the nineteenth century and are not situated, nor do they provide easy access, for resupply via large trucks. Their floor plans are too small by today's big-box standards, and can compete only as boutique shops, small restaurants or niche suppliers. In the real village, space is provided for pedestrians but not for thousands of cars in giant parking lots. The new shopping version of Wrentham Village is representative of the type of shopping infrastructure that is being built all over the United States. These new facilities offer easy access, are designed to get in and out of as efficiently as possible (for both stocking and purchase), provide ample floor space for products and have minimal, cost-efficient public spaces.

What makes the example in Wrentham more jarring than elsewhere is its comparison to the traditional New England farming village just a stone's throw away. In much of the rest of the country, the surrounding sprawl of infrastructure is not that much different from these new shopping villages. But in New England, infrastructure in the traditional towns tends to be human-scaled and of a layout and design that seems to fit the landscape instead of overwhelming it. In the Wrentham Village shopping center, the merchandise is a bargain, but it seems that the design of public space and the center's fit in its surroundings are also offered at a discount.

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