Underutilized malls and big box stores litter the American landscape in which more than a half billion square feet of retail space sits empty. These places are underutilized because they are oriented to cars and are cut off from neighborhoods by high-speed, multi-lane roads. At right is a vision of how a Fremont shopping mall could be transformed into a transit-oriented, pedestrian-friendly neighborhood center.

Transforming a Regional Shopping Mall

Robert Hanna
This charrette team included local citizens, planners, public officials and the property owners of the 202,000-square-foot Fremont Mall. The mall rests on 21 acres with about 1,300 feet of frontage on the north side of 23rd Street (Highway 30) in northeast Fremont. The site is 700 feet deep with Yager Road the eastern boundary and the west bounded by a partially vacant strip shopping center slated for future use by the nearby Fremont Area Medical Center. Assisted living centers are in the immediate area, and an “active adult” neighborhood with a 66 housing units is being developed north of the mall.

The 40-year-old mall cannot compete head-to-head with larger, newer retail developments in nearby Omaha, but it can thrive as a local community center that focuses on the daily needs of Fremont residents and especially surrounding neighborhoods, businesses and institutions. The site could provide new opportunities for civic engagement and serve as a transportation hub for city or regional destinations. There is significant residential and retail development near the site as well a growing regional health care sector.

**Challenges**

- Auto-oriented design that discourages pedestrian activity.
- Expansive parking areas that contribute to water pollution and flooding due to excessive runoff from impermeable surfaces.
- Unprotected by trees or shrubs, the site is subject to extremes of heat and cold and visual pollution.
- Lacking streetscape connection/scale, it does not function as a community gathering place. Without safe and clearly delineated pedestrian/bicycle connections between retail establishments and residential areas, and without a clearly defined community/neighborhood identity and function, the mall is no more accessible to locals than other malls accessible by auto.
- The mall lacks appeal as a unique destination and does not meet the expectations of shoppers who want a streetfront experience and access to other forms of transit.
• Create more access points through new roads, trails, transit centers, and connections and open up the mall on all sides. New residential development to the north suggests an opportunity to open the mall’s blank back wall and create a new road with a pedestrian scale streetscape as well as parkland and a small lake on the current vacant lot. New infill construction should emphasize walkability and pedestrian scale.

• Reinvent 23rd Street as a pedestrian-friendly boulevard from Highway 77 to Highway 275.

• Take advantage of the unique identity of Fremont and its “small town feel.” The site could cater to families, connect to the growing senior population in the surrounding neighborhoods, serve nearby health care facilities, and act as an attractive community plaza/focal point.

• Investigate the development of an innovative transit system by combining aspects of demand-responsive and service route systems. The mall could serve as a transit hub for commuters within the city as well as to Omaha and other regional destinations. A transit system could be part of marketing strategy, using vehicles with a “user friendly” appearance.

• Permeable surface parking lots, solar and wind energy installations, and green roofs would provide long-term cost savings as well as unique “eco-friendly” marketing opportunities.

• Generous plantings of low-water perennials in parking areas and even rooftops would reduce runoff and “heat island” effects and would also help delineate pedestrian pathways.

• Mix tried and-true retailers with unique local retailers to appeal to a broader and more diverse market. Consider how the mall can target “empty nester” residential and the growing network of health care services located near the mall. The area’s strong agricultural roots also suggest a location for a farmer’s market.
Environmental
- Auto parking lot converted into an eco-friendly environment.
- New plan for pedestrian and bike-friendly landscaping for the surrounding district.
- Green spaces/water features protected as parks in the district.

Socio-cultural
- Portions of Fremont Mall redeveloped into community center type facilities, i.e., day-care, youth recreation, community social rooms, children’s museum, branch library, etc.
- Mall surrounded with mixed-income housing; “street” relationships exist between housing & redesigned Mall facades.
- Mall rebranded as city’s “Commercial/Civic Activity Center.”

Technological
- Public transit system with the Activity Center as a primary station/destination.
- Mall district WIFI system.
- District alternative energy/utilities system.

Economic
- District Economic/Planning Council to oversee the planning and redevelopment of the area.
- City incentives packages to encourage redevelopment.
- Plans and redevelopment intentions advertised within the Omaha/Lincoln market/Development teams secured from region.

Public Policy
- New sub-area plan for the district/new plan incorporated into Fremont’s Comprehensive Plan.
- Area studied and declared as “blighted” to enable the use of T.I.F. public funds to augment the development funding.
- Zoning maps and City Ordinances changed to accommodate an “Urban Village” plan for the district.

Surrounding the mall with mixed-income housing, creating “street” relationships between housing and redesigned mall facades, and establishing the mall as a transit center are among suggested indicators.