

ONE CONNECTICUT TOWN DOES AWAY WITH A SUBURBAN MALL AND REPLACES IT WITH A NEW MODERN-DAY FORUM: THE COMMUNITY-CENTERED GREEN SPACE. BY OLIVIA MARTIN

SUBURB STRIKES BACK

Malls, those slumbering gray boxes marching across the American suburban landscape, are steadily going extinct. Back in 2014, the *New Yorker* published “Are Malls Over?” in which Rick Caruso, CEO of Caruso Affiliated, was quoted as saying, “Within 10 to 15 years, the typical U.S. mall, unless it is completely reinvented, will be a historical anachronism—a 60-year aberration that no longer meets the public’s needs, the retailers’ needs, or the community’s needs.” The article continues, “Caruso flashed grim photos of their facades. He lingered on a picture of a deserted food court; you could practically smell the stale grease. ‘Does this look like the future to you?’ he asked.”

Even just three years later, it is difficult to imagine the “traditional” mall having a place, even in the most quintessential American suburb, 10 years from now. But while clearly the malls of the 1970s through the ‘90s are not the future, the great irony here is that Caruso specializes in developing malls—luxury outdoor malls, such as the Grove in Los Angeles and the Americana at Brand in Glendale, California. And indeed, just as quickly as those once-ubiquitous beige shopping centers are being torn down across the U.S., shinier, flashier moneymaking entities

are popping up in their place. The Mall 2.0, it seems, is an artificial landscape sans Sbarro and JCPenny’s, with a plethora of vaguely European structures and simulated boutique experiences in their place. Already, it feels like it’s time to reflect on whether or not these new “shopping experiences” will fare any better than their forebears.

However, in Meriden, Connecticut, a town located halfway between New Haven and Hartford, city leaders took an alternate route: transforming a former mall into a resilient 14.4-acre park replete with pedestrian bridges, a 2,150-square-foot amphitheater, a remediated landscape with a flood-control pond, and even drivable turf to accommodate food trucks and farmers markets. More radically, there are future plans to reduce the downtown infrastructure: “The downtown will go back to two-way traffic, like it was in the ‘50s,” said Vincent Della Rocca, project manager at La Rosa Construction, a local family-owned business that helped create Meriden Green.

The \$14 million project was no simple feat, involving an extensive overhaul of a formerly blighted area that locals called “The Hub.” In the 1950s and ‘60s, the city began developing the space to bolster

economic development, and in 1971 the Meriden Mall was built on the site. In the process, the Harbor Brook—technically three different brooks—was obstructed by a maze of underground pipes. The mall closed and in 1992 and 1996 flooding caused by the blocked water streams caused \$30 million in damages to the downtown area. The city took possession of the property in 2005, and it was deemed a brownfield site. A Hub Site Reuse Committee was formed and began making plans to transform the area, creating the Site Reuse Plan in 2007.

Years of approval processes and funding grants later, the City of Meriden’s design team, engineering firm Milone and MacBroom, and LaRosa Construction broke ground in November 2013. Due to it being a former brownfield site, there were many unforeseen obstacles, such as underground oil tanks that had to be removed. The brook was exposed and diverted, “the site was cleaned, foundations were crushed, and six inches of topsoil were placed,” explained Della Rocca; additional landscaping included adding drainage channels, pedestrian bridges, and concrete pathways.

Meriden Green opened in September 2016, with future plans to build a new train station



Top: Meriden Green’s Harbor Brook was once submerged beneath paving and infrastructure, leading to extensive flooding. Now, the water is exposed and diverted, offering flood protection. **Bottom left:** The 14.4-acre park replaces a once-blighted industrial site. **Bottom right:** A pedestrian bridge arcs delicately over the park, connecting people to the downtown, where there are plans for a future train station and mixed-use development.

and a mixed-use commercial and residential building nearby. It is a soothing green space that brings families and community events to mind. Hanover Pond and the brook that feeds into it offer charm and respite in addition to their crucial flood-control functions.

It’s an optimistic project and one that simply makes good sense—the idea that green spaces offer the type

of future-proofing no amount of luxurious shopping can ensure. “Today, ladies and gentlemen, is more than just the opening of a park, it’s more than just a grand flood-control measure,” Mayor Kevin Scarpati said at the opening. “This is the start of a new downtown; this is the start of a new Meriden.” And, if others take note, the state of the new suburban mall, as well.

