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Considerations for adaptive reuse of retail spaces

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PHOTOS BY JEFFREY TOTARO



A vacant ACME supermarket located in Moorestown, New Jersey was recently transformed into a cancer care center for Virtua Health, one of the state's largest, non-profit health systems. The new Virtua Samson Cancer Center accommodates radiation oncology, an infusion treatment suite, a cancer administrative suite and a third-party infusion practice. The facility was designed to promote a sense of hope, serenity and healing.

FIXER-UPPER

The decentralization of non-acute patients away from hospitals has been happening for many years. Hospitals have been exploring creative ways to make the entire facility into an inpatient setting, with all other non-inpatient space relocated offsite. In addition, consolidation of physician practice groups into larger group settings within the community has been a major focus of health

systems as they look to re-dedicate the hospital space to the sickest patients.

The current pandemic, and the concern of future pandemics, has created an economic slowdown that is changing the way systems consider investing in offsite real estate. As many are working remotely, the need and ability to shop at brick-and-mortar locations is both challenged and slowing, as we shift our focus to e-commerce.

This is a trend that predated the

pandemic, but appears as though it is here to stay. This is creating a glut of underutilized retail real estate, much of it closer or within the communities which need, and would use, these healthcare services. Many of the retailers, particularly within chain organizations, are disappearing or re-tooling. These existing spaces could be big box retailers, warehouses, supermarkets, strip malls, shopping centers or even office or hotel spaces. Many retail owners are



The original ACME supermarket had very high ceilings, prompting a challenge for the cancer center's smaller rooms that require acoustical privacy. The original substructure was implemented into the new cancer center to allow the ceiling and lighting to be suspended from it, minimizing the need to construct full-height walls to the full height of the structure.

left to assess what to do with unwanted, un-renewed or underutilized leases, causing many to think outside the box for their future tenants.

The challenge exists for health systems concerned that if they no longer attract patients to their hospitals, how will they maintain their branding, their recognized way of treating and caring for patients? How will their patients recognize their spaces, their entry and check-in sequences and make the association to their brand? How can smaller practices come together

under one roof and have a seamless treatment experience? These are challenges that can be faced when considering relocating to a big box store. What we are seeing in the industry is the growing need for specialty locations, whether it's cancer centers, wellness and rehab spaces, cardiac centers or multi-specialty practitioners.

So, what should health systems be looking for when considering an offsite ambulatory center in an existing building? The following considerations are many that put the patient experience first.

Location, location, location

The choice of a big box store or a storefront must consider its location. We are all patients ourselves at one point in life, so easy access from recognizable communities and roadways needs to be considered. How is the building approached? Does it have ample, immediately adjacent parking? Can the parking lot be easily navigated by both cars and pedestrians? Will the patient be able to get picked up and dropped off in good and bad weather? How will the patient react to the location? When repurposing a

building, consider the local zoning approvals needed. One of the attractive elements of this development can be the simplified approvals vs. new-build construction.

Who is best suited within the building?

Many multi-specialty practice groups are coming together under a single roof, with as many as eight to 10. This drives efficiency in both touch points, patient flow, access to technology, time sharing and branding.

It can be challenging to have providers

come together with a common vision for the building, but the time spent on developing the design concept must happen during this critical phase in order to gain alignment and buy-in from all who will use the building. Many projects fail in this critical step with competing wants and needs that are not addressed and resolved early on.

What kind of building?

It is critically important to align the program needs with the available space, and to allocate the available space proportionate to not only the size of the practice, but its potential for future growth. These spaces need to keep flexibility in mind, whether it's an ambulatory surgery center considering adding a future eye practice, or a cancer program seeing the future growth in immunotherapies that may need infusion spaces. The ability to grow and expand into adjacent spaces with minimum impact is an important consideration.

The shape of the available floor plate is also very important — too long or too deep will build inefficiencies into the planning layouts. The exterior of the building, and the ability to reconfigure, is an important consideration. Many supermarket buildings are branded with exterior design elements, which can be costly to remove.

When considering a building, the existing exterior may require a bigger investment to re-brand. No one wants precious financial resources invested needlessly into exterior elements, but some changes are needed and important. Careful and strategic modifications can make a substantial difference, but make sure the building owners agree with the changes.

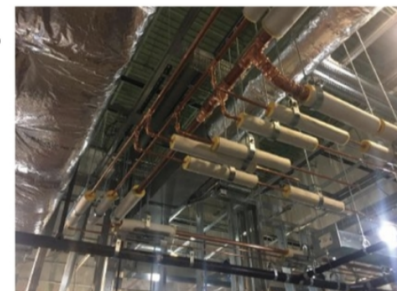
Cosmetic upgrades, such as highlighting windows and entry points or changing exterior colors can have a big impact, as can signage and adding wayfinding elements such as canopies and lighting. If a storefront in a strip mall is being considered, the facility should stand out from its neighbors and become the destination driver.

Evaluate MEP systems, infrastructure

Other things to consider would include the infrastructure, such as the existing mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems. They should be studied for service life and replaced or upgraded for efficiency. Some medical spaces, such as operating rooms,

require an emergency generator to be installed — think ahead about the location, space and connection to electrical systems.

Medical practices require a lot of hand-washing sinks and plumbing so ensure the supply and drainage systems are efficiently utilized. The core and shell of the building must also be understood. Many supermarkets and big box retailers have high-bay construction, which means it can be 24 feet clear height on the inside. That's great for easy installation of mechanical systems, but expensive to hang people-level ceilings, in addition to conditioning the spaces above. The roof construction can be very lightweight and not suitable for supporting rooftop systems so investigate early. Many exterior walls are generally a single width



MEP systems are crucial to evaluate when undertaking an adaptive reuse project; they should be studied for service life and replaced or upgraded for efficiency.

of masonry with insulation in the exterior coating. Time and money will need to be invested for an energy-efficient shell, but it's generally quicker, easier and cheaper to upgrade existing walls than to build new.

Choosing to repurpose an existing building is a smart move for many projects. From speed to market, the socially responsible recycling aspect and the need to bring care closer to the communities they're serving, are all factors to consider. Understanding the particular building, and its advantages and limitations ahead of time, will make the investment substantially better and the outcome for the community that much greater.

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