

## Back To The Basics

Popular designs currently center around a Main Street feel, with timeless designs and flexible spaces, though social media ensures architects still have a couple tricks up their sleeves.

Nellie Day



Steelpoint Harbor in Bridgeport, Connecticut, is a mixed-use project on the waterfront of the Long Island Sound designed by CUPKOVIC architecture. Initial phases included a dock master building and marina, restaurants and multifamily development with retail.

This may be the “new normal” post-COVID, but it also feels like a bygone era. At least if you visit many of today’s prominent retail centers. That’s because many architects note the current trends center around what’s familiar. They emphasize small-town charm, basic designs that maximize flexibility, and oftentimes utilize what’s already well-known and loved.

Rob Budetti, managing partner at AO in Orange, California, notes there’s a reason for this return to the fundamentals.

“Trends come and go,” he says. “That’s why, in the long-term, we prefer to pair timeless architecture and flexible design to ensure that retail centers stay relevant as our culture evolves.”

### DESIGN FUNDAMENTALS

Maximizing flexibility to pivot with what’s popular now isn’t the only motivation for timeless design. Costs and the recent supply chain woes have played a role in this as well.

“The key factor impacting construction over the past several years

continues to be increased construction costs coupled with very low supplies and long lead times,” Budetti continues. “You

want to identify cost-effective design solutions that offer clients a good-better-best scenario to meet budget demands while still achieving high-quality design.”



Rob Budetti,  
AO



For Page Winkler, president of MCG Architecture in Irvine, California, that often involves a more simplistic approach.

“We see a lot of demand for contemporary designs that have simpler shapes and elements,” she says. “The more simplicity in design, the more flexibility for changes, signage visibility and reduced construction costs.”

Then, of course, there’s the notion of sticking with what works.

“From our point of view, keeping to the original character of an existing building and paying homage to it by retaining its form, materials and structure is the best way to alleviate cost,” says Jon Gripka, director of design at BRR Architecture in Overland Park, Kansas. “If we can responsibly design around and in harmony with the existing space, we can achieve more cost-effective and stronger designs.”

This is done, Gripka says, by collaborating with the project team and even the general contractor up front. He also likes to build in time, when



Topanga Social food hall at Westfield Topanga in Canoga Park, California, brings the outside in through the use of open-air spaces and biophilic design.

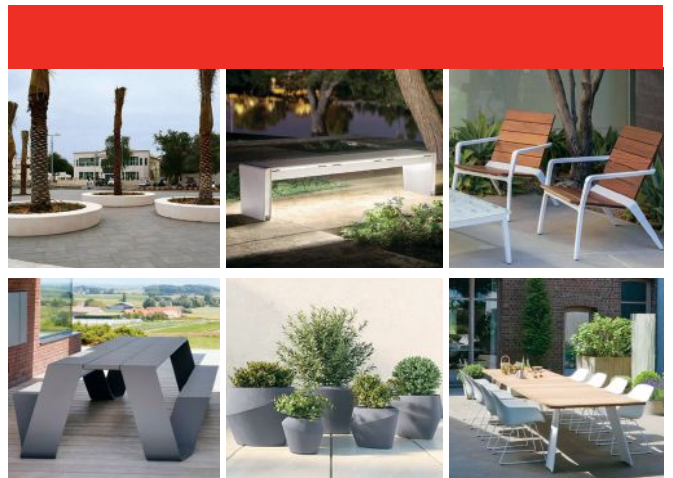
possible, to understand the existing building and its design elements before a project commences.

Staying true to an existing center’s

roots can have the added benefit of emphasizing local culture, Budetti adds. This was the case in Riverton, Utah, where AO designed the new



Designed by AO, Topanga Social is a 55,000-square-foot dining hall with more than 25 vendors, indoor seating for 700 diners and outdoor courtyard seating for 80 guests.



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Midtown Miami sits on a 55-acre site that was originally the Buena Vista Railyard for the FEC (Florida East Cost) Railroad. The 23-acre East portion of the development is a mixed-use asset that includes residential towers with ground-floor, service-oriented retail. The 32-acre West portion of the development is a retail mixed-use district organized in blocks that include retail, residential and entertainment uses.

Mountain View Village, an 85-acre mixed-use destination by CenterCal Properties just 30 miles south of Salt Lake City.

“Mountain View Village is a great example of design that preserves the aesthetic of a traditional Main Street with the conveniences and luxuries of a modern retail space,” he says. “It is reminiscent of a small town, offering a plaza with a state-of-the-art fountain near an airy, glass-walled covered pavilion highlighting the local food scene with indoor and outdoor dining. Our goal in design was to offer the look and feel of a city’s downtown offerings, but in a master-planned community.”

The project, which just celebrated the one-year grand opening of Phase II, includes shopping and dining, as well as a 14-screen theatre complex, fitness gym, escape room, dentist, chiropractor and office space for residents of the quickly developing nearby neighborhoods. It also features a built-in stadium-stair area with a communal firepit fixture that encourages visitors to relax and enjoy the gathering space, which surrounds a dramatic, three-story micro-LED glass display.

Budetti adds that you don’t have to design a massive mixed-use lifestyle center from the ground up to incorporate items that can transform a center while preserving capital.

“We advise clients to spend their dollars where it counts — on high consumer touchpoints and elements that drive experience,” he says.

This is a strategy Robert W. Kubicek, CEO at RKA Architects in Phoenix, sees a lot nowadays.

“As money gets tighter due to factors such as inflation and rising interest rates, we’d suggest shopping center owners take a step back and look at what they already have and start from there,” he says. “What could they add to help maximize their current property?”

Kubicek suggests, for example, adding entertainment tenants, such as indoor mini-golf, or creating an outdoor space around existing food and beverage tenants, which may keep people at the center a little longer.

## DESIGN ELEMENTS

Noel L. Cupkovic, principal at CUPKOVIC architecture in Cleveland, likes to use shape and clusters when designing a center. He believes

food and beverage tenants are ideal to design around.

“We have a few mall repositionings on the boards that include taking former parking lot space and creating open-air restaurant clusters organized around a common area with seasonal amenities,” he says. “[Other examples of good architectural design include] organizing a center on a mixed-use main street. You can also create block geometry for a project with a mix of uses, creating different zones of use that are walkable or stacked.”

Celebration Pointe in Gainesville, Florida, for example, offers two blocks of outdoor entertainment space on a pedestrian-friendly promenade, anchored by a Regal Cinema and Bass Pro Shops. CUPKOVIC’s design also features 35,000 square feet of restaurants within the promenade, including MidiCi Neapolitan Pizza, the Keys Grill & Piano Bar, Spurrier’s Restaurant, Prime & Pearl Restaurant and more.

It’s no coincidence that design elements like promenades, fountains, seating areas around firepits and LED glass display walls are prominent nowadays. Yes, many of the newer centers are open air, but emphasizing the natural, outdoor environment whenever and however possible is a major design priority today.

“The expression of steel structures has given way to CLTs (cross-laminated timber) and more celebrated wood structures,” Gripka says. “The incorporation of biophilic design and greenery is also prevalent in building interi-



Noel L. Cupkovic,  
CUPKOVIC architecture



Jon Gripka,  
BRR Architecture

ors and exteriors. It feels as though buildings are being designed to incorporate the natural environment rather than merely co-exist with it.”

Gripka notes current design preferences are trending toward warmth and comfort, much more so than they have over the past five years when industrial elements like aluminum, steel and hard angles were en vogue. Now, he sees compositions that have softened with curves and flowing forms, representing a more natural environment.

Kubicek has also seen a transition in popular materials today, and it’s not necessarily due to supply chain challenges.

“One of the top trends we’re noticing in retail architecture is the incorporation of glass and wood accents in the building’s exterior elevations, as well as throughout the interior, which helps liven up the space and add a sense of sophistication,” he says.

Another benefit, Cupkovic adds, is spaces that emphasize the outdoors tend to play well with the local population.

“I feel the most vital designs are ones that are inherently good for the local and regional communities,” he says. “These projects can have conservations areas, a trail system or be connected to a trail system. They should pursue some level of sustainability and remain timeless in their design.”

You know your outdoor areas and design elements were done well if they keep guests on the property longer.

“This is often done by incorporating a diverse mix of tenants with beautiful outdoor areas where people can sit and relax,” Kubicek says. “Gone are the days where you would install a simple metal canopy to add shade for your customers. Instead, think of how you could incorporate unique architectural elements that would provide that shade.”

Frankie Campione, founder and principal of CREATE Architecture Planning & Design in New York City, believes the word “unique” is also subjective. After all, something can be unique without being effective,

which is why it all comes down to what works in your market with your demographic.

“Stop trying to copy what someone else did halfway across the country and land it on your site because it was successful elsewhere,” he advises. “Figure out why it was successful. Adapt, take risks and observe the end user. That’s not a style nor aesthetic, that’s the reason we create shopping environments.”

#### DESIGNING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Taking risks seems to be in direct opposition to focusing on the basics, working with what you have and remaining true to the area. Remember those “few twists” we referenced in the beginning? That’s where social media comes in. And that’s where a lot of the oneupmanship comes from nowadays.

“Social media is impacting our world,” Cupkovic says. “There’s likely a ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ mentality with direct competitors of tenants or property owners.”



RDC is working on Kinective, a luxury fitness project in Plano, Texas, that will create an experience-driven, mixed-use environment that offers amenities beyond fitness. These include physical therapy services, a spa and pool, indoor/outdoor gathering areas, food and beverage and retail offerings.



# DESIGN



Billed as a “contemporary coastal retail experience,” 2nd & PCH in Long Beach, California, utilizes its landscape and placemaking to create the environment’s tone. AO focused on strong pedestrian connectivity, an extensive art program, moments of discovery and an array of plant materials to further enhance the space.

Adaptability and more basic designs allow shopping center owners and their design teams to add lively, compelling and often ever-changing elements that play to the end user.

“As a result, design has shifted toward the creation of flexible spaces, ‘Instagrammable’ moments and bold artwork,” Budetti adds.

The problem, as Campione pointed out, is that many of these players are chasing the same trends.

“Every designer wants to create something new, fresh and different,” Gripka says. “Firms are generating new projects faster than ever before, and with the growth of social media, designs are often seen, then mimicked. Our clients are also influenced by what they see in social media and that can inform a design.”

Yes, it turns out that college students and wannabe influencers aren’t the only ones who utilize popular social media platforms



Tanger Daytona, an outlet center in Daytona Beach, Florida, includes an abundance of plants and outdoor seating with shade to motivate customers to linger. It was designed by CREATE Architecture Planning & Design.



like Instagram, Pinterest and TikTok. Mitra Esfandiari, a partner at RDC in Long Beach, California, knows this firsthand.

“Architecture and design trends are spreading through social media,” she says. “As a result, designers gain greater access to inspiring precedent images and essential insight into global trends by accessing a vast, untapped audience and engaging with them. This has made image-sharing platforms influential among the design community.”

Esfandiari notes her clients are asking for Instagrammable spots to fuel their marketing efforts. They see these typically beautiful, often colorful backdrops as a visual storytelling tool that can reinforce their brand, drive social media engagement, and, of course, result in higher visits and more sales.



Mitra Esfandiari,  
RDC

That’s exactly what Urbana Mexican Gastronomy & Mixology did when it filled its back wall with a brightly colored, backlit mural at its outpost at Sky Deck, a food hall at Del Mar Highlands in Del Mar, California. The mural’s size, colors and surprising nature draws in the customer’s gaze, which can then extend to the rest of the space, possibly resulting in a sale.

Campione also views these picture-worthy spots and the platforms they show up on as simply another marketing tool, but an important one nonetheless.

“Social media is just a way of getting the word out,” he says. “If utilized wisely, it’s no different than print and media ads for previous generations. It’s a matter of understanding the needs and preferences of a new generation and how they want to obtain information. If used properly, social media should act as a vehicle to elaborate on identity, spark emotion, and establish a relationship between the end user, their experience and the physical product.”



Celebration Pointe in Gainesville, Florida, features two blocks of outdoor entertainment space on a pedestrian-friendly promenade, anchored by a Regal Cinema and Bass Pro Shops. It includes 35,000 square feet of restaurants within the promenade, which was designed by CUPKOVIC architecture.



Esfandiari stands next to a mural at Urbana Mexican Gastronomy & Mixology at Sky Deck, a food hall at Del Mar Highlands in Del Mar, California. The mural’s size, colors and surprising nature draws in the customer’s gaze, even from the back wall.



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# DESIGN

These Instagram-worthy backdrops may get customers into a center for one or two posts, but not much more than that if a space stays stagnant. That's why, once again, flexibility is the name of the game when it comes to designing spaces that can meet the many needs of today's audience.

"We see clients asking for large, customizable spaces that can be changed for special occasions, maker markets and pop-up events programmed throughout the year," Budetti says.

The opportunity to start with a blank slate of sorts and customize has led many landlords to stick with basic colors and themes that can go in a number of different directions depending upon the next temporary use, Campione says.

"While the beige shopping centers seem to be a thing of the past, there is a continued desire for a palette of white, grey and black, whether a renovation or refresh, farmhouse modern or contemporary," he says.

Like shopping center owners, tenants are also looking for flexibility, but in smaller quantities.

"The majority of our clients are pushing for smaller retail footprints



SoDo (south of downtown) in Orlando, Florida, is a 22-acre, transit-adjacent urban infill mixed-use project. It features retailers like TJ Maxx and a Super Target with rooftop parking. It was designed by CUPKOVIC architecture.

across the board, and we're programming smaller spaces in all current retail projects," Budetti notes. "We continue to push innovation and develop creative design solutions for clients seeking flexible spaces that can contract and expand based on tenant needs."

As spaces expand and contract, remain neutral so they can be easily invigorated and stay true to their roots while providing something new, one thing is clear: architects will have plenty of opportunities to get back the drawing board as they try to draw in the new retail consumer. **SCB**



Photo courtesy of AO

Mountain View in Salt Lake City includes a plaza with a fountain, children's play area and outdoor games. The fountain features energy-efficient LED color-changing lighting and musical shows.