# THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THE MACON MALL THROUGH A SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE LENS

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**AN APPLIED RESEARCH PAPER BY**

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**Research Question:** The goal of this research paper is to examine the Macon Mall's historic, current, and future role as essential social infrastructure in West Macon and to identify strategies that can bolster the health, economic prosperity, and general quality of life for area residents.

## Introduction

Founded in 1823 on the Ocmulgee River, the City of Macon sits at the geographic heart of Georgia and is home to a number of notable distinctions. It has been the jumping off point for many famous musical talents, from Otis Redding and Little Richard Penniman to the Allman Brothers Band and Jason Aldean. The city also has a storied history, being the site of the millennium old Ocmulgee Burial Mounds, serving briefly as the state capital during the Civil War, and being an integral transportation hub between the Port of Savannah and the City of Atlanta for nearly two hundred years.

A more recent honor held by the city, and one highly coveted among suburban areas at the time, was having the title of "Largest Mall in Georgia" from 1997 to 1999 (Packer, 2021). Originally known as the Colonial Macon Mall and erected in 1975, this superregional center was over 1.4 million square feet at its peak of popularity and had a service area of the Middle Georgia Region and beyond (Packer, 2021). The mall was originally sited in West Macon between the two Macon travel routes of Mercer University Drive and Eisenhower Parkway, providing ample arterial circulation for the surrounding mall area. The mall also sits equidistant from Interstate-75 and the Interstate Spur of 475, allowing effortless regional access. These factors, coupled with the popularity of enclosed shopping malls from the 1970's to the early 2000's, made the Macon Mall a thriving commercial and social destination for decades.

At its peak, the 200 stores that called the mall home lured shoppers through the mall's doors. Once inside, though, shoppers found themselves enjoying the social setting that brought so many from diverse backgrounds together. The mall became "intertwined in the coming of age of many people here," according to an article from the WMAZ news station (WMAZ, 2017).

In more academic terms, the Macon Mall served as a climate-controlled, well-lit space for residents of all ages to carry out the reinforcement of social cohesion. Social cohesion refers to "the quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective… that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members" and is regarded as a strong indicator of quality of life and general well-being within a society (Delhey et al., 2018).

The places that foster this sort of social cohesion are known as "social infrastructure," a term that acclaimed sociologist and author Eric Klinenberg defines as "the physical conditions that determine whether social [cohesion] develops" (Klinenberg, 2018). Since its inception in 1975, the Macon Mall has served as a critical piece of social infrastructure for the City of Macon and especially for the area of West Macon that immediately surrounds it. For the purposes of this report, West Macon includes the neighborhoods of Unionville, the southern portion of Cherokee Heights, the "West Macon" neighborhood, Bloomfield, and Westgate, as seen in Figure 1 below. Its close proximity to numerous neighborhoods made the Mall a mainstay of social and economic life for West Maconites. A series of unfortunate events in the late 2000's, however, caused the Mall to fall from grace and enter a financial rough patch. Throughout the 2010's, the Mall continued to decline, losing anchor stores, food court tenants, and falling into a state of disuse. Today, the Macon Mall sits at just a fraction of its former occupancy rate, with hundreds of thousands of square feet of space unused and vacant. The property represents a starkly visible reminder to the residents of West Macon of the thriving social and commercial space they once cherished, and which houses many pleasant memories.

The current woes of the Macon Mall and West Macon have not gone unnoticed by City leadership. Spearheaded by the Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority, an effort is underway to return life to the Macon Mall space. Plans include building out a 10,000-seat amphitheater on a stretch of Mall parking lot, a large indoor pickleball facility (lovingly branded "The PickleMall"), government offices, and a library annex (Fabian, 2022). Each of these uses has been thoughtfully chosen as financially responsible investments in the space. The largest two (the amphitheater and the PickleMall) are intended to pay for themselves with the revenue they bring in, representing a financially innovative approach by a local government to spur

economic growth and maintain financial solvency (A. Morrison, personal communication, February 17, 2023).

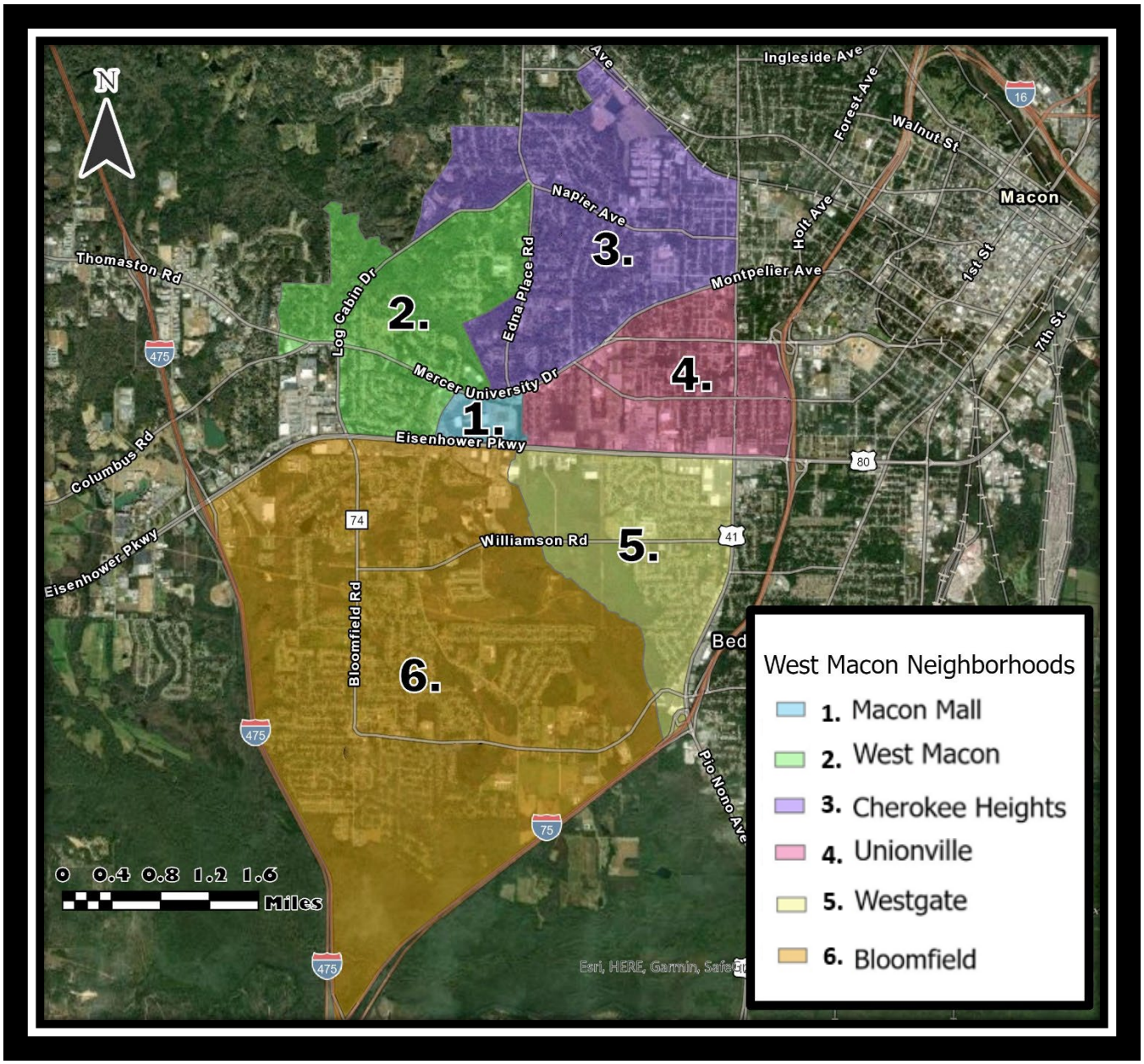


*Figure 1: Map of Macon showing West Macon Neighborhoods*

Considering these thoughtful tactics being pursued by the City of Macon, this paper approaches the redevelopment of the Macon Mall space explicitly through a social infrastructure lens, seeking to examine the Macon Mall's historic, current, and future role as essential social infrastructure in West Macon. After establishing the case for the Macon Mall's role as social infrastructure through a review of the existing literature, various techniques for incubating social infrastructure in disused commercial space will be assessed and applied to the specific conditions of the Macon Mall redevelopment. The ultimate goal of this social infrastructure-centered approach will be to recommend uses for the physical space that will directly bolster the health, economic prosperity, and quality of life for West Macon residents.

## Literature Review

### Social Cohesion

Before social infrastructure can be fully defined and discussed, it is important to first explore the concept of "social cohesion" and the role that this invisible, uniting force plays in society. The term first entered the sociological lexicon in the late 1800's through the work of Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies. It did not gain traction as a widely used concept in the literature, however, until the 1990's, when it transitioned into a powerful composite term characterizing the "extent and quality of communal 'togetherness' in a collectivity of people" (Delhey et al., 2018). As is often the case in the world of social sciences, exactly what is included in the term social cohesion varies from one academic opinion to the next. Most sociologists agree though, that social cohesion at its core consists of social and political trust, civic-mindedness, participation, tolerance, social relations and networks, and the absence of conflicts (Delhey et al., 2018). For the purposes of this paper, the Bertelsmann Stiftung Social Cohesion Radar will be employed as the definitive, working definition of social cohesion. This

model, seen in Figure 2 below, consists of three core domains and nine subdomains to give a comprehensive definition of the term.

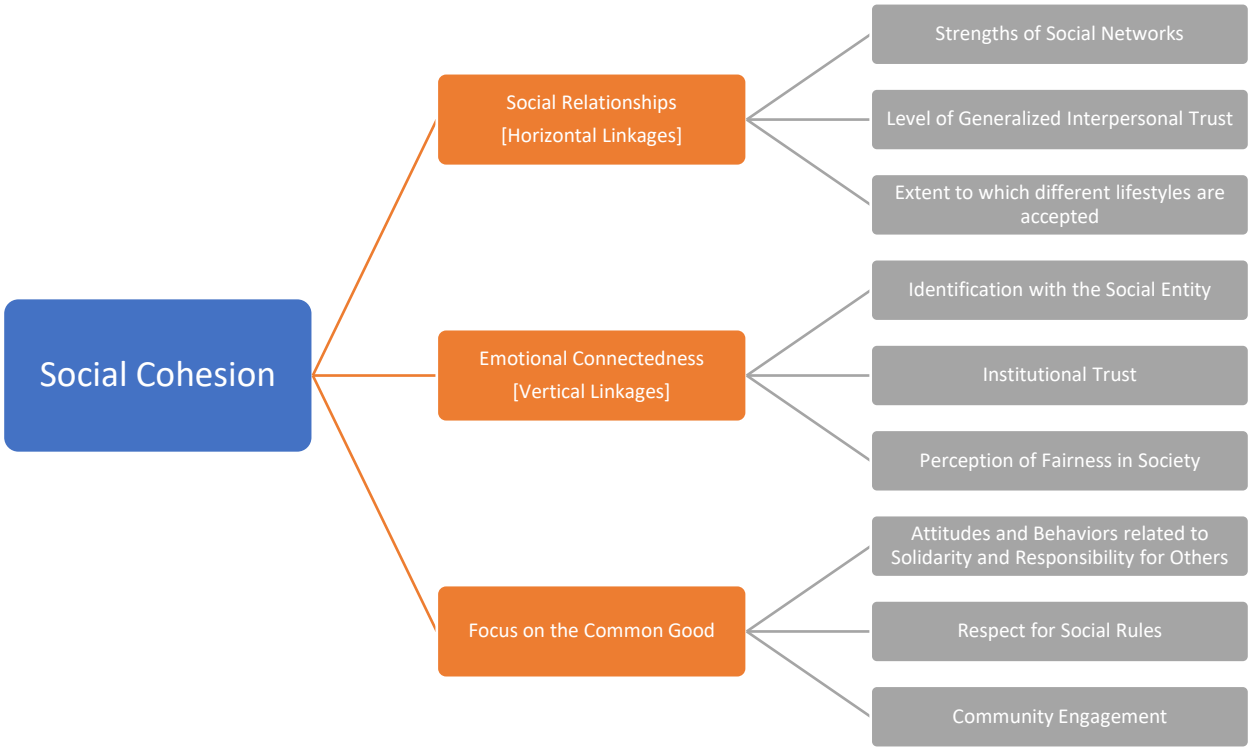


*Figure 2: Diagram of the Domains and Subdomains of the Social Cohesion Radar. Source: (Dragolov, 2013)*

Social relationships, the first of the core domains, relates to the level of connection that exists between individuals and between societal groups in a community. Strong interpersonal relationships contribute heavily to the resiliency of communities, as put forth by Eric Klinenberg in his book *Palaces for the People*. The strength of social networks in Chicago's less affluent neighborhoods during a brutal heatwave in 1995 proved to have a very close relationship with the number of fatalities experienced during the heatwave. As a resident of the Auburn Gresham neighborhood shared, "we always check in on one another and knock on the doors of elderly, vulnerable neighbors when it's very hot or very cold" (Klinenberg, 2018). The close-knit social

networks seen in this example lent the Auburn Gresham neighborhood a resilience unseen in neighborhoods with similar demographics, but looser ties between community members. These social networks are both supported by and simultaneously foster the other two aspects of the social relationships domain. Generalized interpersonal trust and acceptance of diversity are inherent in strong social relationships and are supported by the existence of these relationships.

The second core domain, emotional connectedness, "emphasizes the vertical relations among individuals, their social entity, and its institutions" (Delhey et al., 2018). Simply put, this domain assesses how much connection an individual feels with organizations and institutions on a scale ranging from that of their local social institutions all the way to the national government that represents them. Attitudes of fairness towards institutional processes and the trust that individuals place in these institutions are two of the defining features of this domain. A tie in can again be seen in Klinenberg's research, specifically on how "stop and frisk" policies that allow police to search someone they suspect of engaging in criminal activity have led to a decrease in institutional trust in the police force, especially for those living in high-crime areas (Klinenberg, 2018). The perception of fairness and trust in the overall justice system inevitably decreases for every stop and frisk search of an innocent citizen. When viewed with respect to the larger picture of social cohesion, emotional connectedness within these vertical relations serves an important role in creating a fair and just society.

The final domain of social cohesion, as defined in the Social Cohesion Radar, is a focus on the common good. This aspect of social cohesion focuses on the degree to which individuals adhere to society's agreed upon rules, whether people go out of their way to help others (even when it does not directly benefit them), and whether people "participate in society and political life and enter into public discussions" (Dragolov, 2013). A breakdown in this domain of a community's social cohesion shows itself quickly and visibly. The issue of returning shopping carts at a grocery store is an excellent example of this principle. When a focus on the common good is present in a community, members will return shopping carts to their correct spaces so others may easily access them. In a community without a clear focus on the common good, shoppers may leave carts scattered around the parking lot, or worse, take the cart entirely

(Williams, 2001). One grocery store, Aldi, employs an innovative approach to ensuring cart return by requiring customers to put down a $0.25 deposit for use of a cart. Upon return of the cart to its proper area, the deposit is refunded to the customer. While tactics like this can help bandage the negative effects of an individualistic society, communities that foster social cohesion spend less time and resources combatting these types of problems since they will occur with less frequency in the first place.

The benefits of social cohesion to society may seem self-evident, as the definition of the term provides manifold examples of the utility and positive outcomes that come from its presence. There are, indeed, many factors that are beneficial to communities inherent in the domains and subdomains that make up social cohesion, such as the resiliency of communities to adverse conditions, trust in social institutions that allow them to function more efficiently, and an increase in the consideration of the common good. In addition to surface level benefits to communities, there is a more abstract and all-encompassing variable that is heavily influenced by the existence of social cohesion. Subjective well-being is a measure of "the degree to which people in each society are accomplishing the values which they hold dear" (Diener, 2003). This measure accounts for the differences between the values that societies hold and is therefore subjective. It is a suitable definition by which to measure the abstract concept of well-being in various communities. Delhey et al. hold that "cohesive societies can be considered more 'warm hearted' and solidary, arguably they cater better for social needs, such as loving, respect and friendship. Cohesive societies, hence, induce a flow of positive life experiences and emotions, which should contribute to a high level of subjective well-being" (Delhey et al., 2018). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shares in the findings that social cohesion leads to positive outcomes for individuals' "physical health and psychosocial well-being" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Factors such as getting a job from a friend's employment connections or receiving emotional support from a social network during a difficult time can be strongly dependent upon a community's level of social cohesion. The ability to accomplish a certain level of success, however that may be locally defined, is a social measure that should not be overlooked when considering a community's needs. Summarily, "'Cohesion is happiness.' Subjective well-being, as manifested in such things

as life satisfaction, is higher for people who live in cohesive societies. Simply put, the greater the cohesion, the better" (Dragolov, 2013).

## Social Infrastructure

Thus far, the concept of social cohesion has been examined as a composite of its subcomponents and has been demonstrated to be an essential framework underlying successful communities. The level of social cohesion seen in communities is not the outcome of random interactions, however, but instead results from conscious investment in the physical spaces that promote social interactions. These physical spaces are known as social infrastructure, a relatively new term on the sociological scene referring to the "spaces that support and create the opportunities for social connection" (Layton & Latham, 2022). These social connections, according to Jack Layton and Alan Latham, encourage the building blocks of social cohesion, such as "conviviality and community, encounter with strangers and refuge, a public ethos, a democratic mindedness, and inclusiveness" (Layton & Latham, 2022). In essence, social cohesion is the inevitable outcome of smoothly functioning social infrastructure in a community.

Social infrastructure shares many similarities with more traditionally defined concepts of infrastructure. Just like a well-built bridge or a regularly maintained power grid, social infrastructure tends to blend in and go unnoticed by everyday citizens. As Susan Leigh Star writes in "The Ethnography of Infrastructure", "[Infrastructure] is by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work. It's sunk into and inside of other structures, social arrangements, and technologies. It's transparent to use, in the sense that it does not have to be reinvented each time or assembled for each task, but invisibly supports those tasks" (Star, 1999). Most of us think very little about the task of turning on the lights in a room, and yet, a multitude of complex infrastructural systems must operate seamlessly in order for this to occur. The smallest malfunction in an electrical substation 10 miles away can leave us in the dark, scratching our heads as to what has gone wrong. In likewise fashion, social infrastructure

operates in the background, enabling the interactions that lead to social cohesion and the cascade of societal benefits that come from it.

Star writes that "The normally invisible quality of working infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks… Even when there are back-up mechanisms or procedures, their existence further highlights the now-visible infrastructure" (Star, 1999). When social infrastructure breaks, or worse yet, fails to be built in the first place, whole communities suffer profound and health-threatening consequences. Take, for example, a recent study conducted using a nationally representative probability survey of American adults in April 2020. This study set out to determine if social isolation due to enforced COVID-19 restrictions was a significant factor in levels of depression and loneliness in the general population. Researcher Molly Rosenberg and her team found that "Very frequent in-person social and sexual contacts during the time of COVID-19 restrictions in the last month were generally associated with lower prevalence of depression and loneliness, while remote contacts were not similarly protective" (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Rates of depressive symptoms in American adults increased from roughly 8% pre-pandemic to 33% during the first month of COVID-19 restrictions (Rosenberg et al., 2021). The unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a swift and near-complete shutdown of most social infrastructure spaces in the United States and the result on the population's mental health was equally swift and impactful. Layton and Latham sum up the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic's assault on social infrastructure in saying, "It becomes so much harder to maintain and nurture the social connections that enable urban life to flourish when social infrastructure functionally vanishes. Workarounds can be achieved. But they are often a poor substitute for a robust, well maintained, open and accessible set of spaces where people can go to gather, play, eat, drink, read, rest, relax, and spectate together" (Layton & Latham, 2022).

## **Public Social Infrastructure**

Social infrastructure typically falls into one of two categories in the United States, public and private. The first of these is the traditionally defined "Public Spaces", those that are funded

mainly by tax dollars and are open to the general public without monetary barriers to entry and use. Parks and open green spaces have long been regarded as quintessential public spaces for communities to build social cohesion (Klinenberg, 2018). Parks can be the sites of picnics, pickup sports games, festivals, outdoor markets, dance lessons, yoga sessions, and much more. Inherent in all of these activities and in the public nature of parks and greenspace is the lack of physical or social barriers to keep specific groups out. Public parks and greenspaces encourage solidarity, acting as "spaces of encounter and conviviality across lines of gender, race and class" (Layton & Latham, 2022). The intermixing of ideas happening in public places like parks results in the strengthening of the "social relationships" and "focus on the common good" domains of the Social Cohesion Radar through the learning of tolerance and experiences that inspire diversity in thought (Delhey et al., 2018). Layton and Latham refer to the existence of many groups in one space as "co-presence" and purport that "thinking with this idea of co- presence it's possible to see the way the park actively encourages and invites people in, to spend time in the proximity of others through the provision of diverse sports facilities, public restrooms, and well-maintained grounds" (Layton & Latham, 2022). Indeed, the importance of parks and greenspace as explicitly "public" social infrastructure cannot be overemphasized.

Another classic example of public social infrastructure is the public library system that exists in the United States. Eric Klinenberg regards libraries as "among the most crucial forms of social infrastructure we have", and subsequently titled his book after famed steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie's description of libraries as "Palaces for the People". Libraries serve a variety of social cohesion building functions, not least of which is their role in connecting people to their communities that otherwise would be prone to "isolation and loneliness" (Klinenberg, 2018). While libraries serve patrons of all ages, one of the populations that derive the most social cohesion benefits from libraries are the elderly. As people age, levels of social interaction typically decrease due to mobility issues, deaths within social networks, and retirement from the workforce (Dalmer & Mitrovica, 2022). Many library systems house programming specifically targeted towards older adults, with activities like "book clubs, writing groups, computer training, English as a Second Language resources and learning opportunities, knitting circles, author readings, informational sessions, and movie showings" (Dalmer & Mitrovica,

2022). It is also in libraries that elderly citizens have the chance to interact with people of all ages, an opportunity that may not come from any other dimension in their lives. Klinenberg writes that in libraries, the elderly "can be part of a diverse and robust community, not a homogenous one where everyone fears decline" (Klinenberg, 2018).

In addition to combatting the isolation of those at the higher end of the age spectrum, libraries also serve the needs of those on the lower end. For teens seeking a safe space to socialize and do homework after school, the library provides chairs, desks, outlets, and often an internet connection. This role as a refuge is especially important for teens who, as Klinenberg puts it, would "rather study or socialize than hang out in the streets". The library develops the "focus on the common good" domain in teenagers because it allows them to borrow books and take on the responsibility of caring for and returning those books (Klinenberg, 2018). Libraries teach teens about following and respecting the rules of society but do so in a softer environment with lower stakes than other spaces offer. Klinenberg shares the example of the Lefrak City branch library in New York City which employs security guards to help ease tensions that the librarians alone cannot handle. The guards provide a safe and positive environment which helps teens internalize the benefits of a kind and orderly society (Klinenberg, 2018).

Public social infrastructure comes in more forms than the traditional park and library models outlined here. Any publicly owned space has the potential to act as social infrastructure, as long as it meets the core requirement of fostering social cohesion within a community. The Beltline in Atlanta, Georgia is a 22-mile multi-use trail that forms a loop around the inner portions of the city. While primarily designed as a transportation network to increase connectivity by bicycling or walking, the Beltline has grown into an important piece of social infrastructure for Atlanta citizens. According to the Beltline Equitable Development Plan, a document designed to ensure an equitable dispersion of benefits from the project, the Beltline seeks to "solidify the social fabric of the city by creating connectivity among disparate and diverse communities" (Beltline, 2023). Opportunities abound on the Beltline for community members to gather, interact, and meet people outside of their immediate social circles. The trail has benches, public art, and plenty of areas that encourage lingering, not just pedestrian

throughput. This multibillion-dollar project represents a conscious investment by elected officials into the city's social infrastructure.

In recent decades, public leaders have become more attentive to the threats that natural disasters pose to our cities. According to Klinenberg, this newfound concern has resulted in the construction of hard infrastructure projects aimed at mitigating the destructive power of weather events such as hurricanes and tsunamis. Policy makers have also come to realize the opportunities inherent in these projects to "strengthen the networks that promote health and prosperity during ordinary times" (Klinenberg, 2018). Hard infrastructure projects like the Waterplein Benthemplein in Rotterdam, Amsterdam combine the hard infrastructural need to store rainfall and prevent flooding with the social infrastructural need to hold space for social bonding in the city. The "Water-square" structure is comprised of massive basins designed to collect and store area stormwater in a safe manner. In dry weather, however, the square serves as a recreation and relaxation area for local residents, providing a "sports pit fit for football, volleyball, and basketball", a skate park, and plenty of seating (Abrams & Hadighi, 2020). Projects like the Waterplein Benthemplein showcase the infinite creativity possible when incorporating social infrastructure into the built environment.

**Private Social Infrastructure**

The other main category that social infrastructure falls into is private social infrastructure. This includes physical spaces that promote social cohesion but are funded and run by private owners rather than government entities. Private social infrastructure can be as exclusive or accessible as the owner wants it to be, with members-only country clubs and glittering Silicon Valley tech campuses as examples of the most private of private social infrastructure. Apple Inc. and Google LLC, both headquartered in the San Francisco Bay area, sponsor "exercise facilities, hair salons, day care centers, theaters, libraries, cafes, and ample space for social gatherings" solely for use by employees and their families (Klinenberg, 2018). While facilities like these undoubtedly aid in the reproduction of social cohesion, they are severely limited in their benefits to communities at large due to their isolating nature. Chance

encounters between strangers become unlikely, and when they do happen, they're typically between those of similar social standing, lifestyle, and often race (Klinenberg, 2018).

In contrast to highly exclusive forms of private social infrastructure, a more communally advantageous model is what sociologist Ray Oldenburg terms "Third Places", the "informal public gathering places" outside of home and workspaces (Oldenburg, 1989). Third places are typically privately owned commercial establishments, and can range from "the corner pub, diner, coffee shop, barbershops, or hair salon, and even at times the hardware or general store" (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2011). Third places have relatively low barriers to entry and serve as a place for people to socialize and linger "regardless of what they've purchased" (Klinenberg, 2018). This inclusivity is important to the building of social cohesion across class, race, and gender, as these third places welcome people from all walks of life. A bar called Sister Louisa's Church in the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood of Atlanta provides a textbook example of private establishments as social infrastructure (seen in Figure 3 below). On the bar's website, the founder writes that "By eliminating smoking, televisions, and internet, 'parishioners' as the locals are called, choose to engage in conversation and other community building activities" (Henry, 2023). With its cheap drinks, inclusive attitude, and focus on interpersonal interactions, "Church Bar" is both figuratively and literally one of the "places on the corner" that Oldenburg holds in such high esteem (Oldenburg, 1989).

*Figure 3: Example of a Third Place, Sister Louisa's Church in Atlanta, GA. Source: (Henry, 2023)*

Some important questions that inevitably arise when private social infrastructure is used and even marketed as a replacement for public space are, “Who is allowed in the space, what is allowed to happen there, and where is the line drawn?”. These questions were brought to the forefront of American social discourse in April 2018 when two African American men were arrested at a Starbucks Café in Philadelphia, PA. The men, who were waiting in the store to conduct a meeting, had asked to use the restroom without first purchasing something. Upon being denied restroom access, they were asked to leave and were subsequently arrested when they refused to do so (Jargon, 2018). The problem here, according to author and historian Bryant Simon, is that Starbucks and other private corporations have explicitly marketed their stores as community spaces without clearly delineating the boundaries between public and private. Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz is on record as saying “We’re not in the commodity business. We’ve created a third place,” and “Almost everywhere we open a store we add value to the community. Our stores become an instant gathering space, a Third Place, that draws people together” (Simon et al., 2009). The incident in Philadelphia, however, suggests that the company’s policies do not always mesh with the idealistic language of leadership. Wall Street Journal columnist Julie Jargon says that Starbucks employees have “long found the coffee company’s guidelines on how to treat lingering nonpaying guests vague at best”, a sentiment that succinctly sums up the feelings many have towards private social spaces like Starbucks (Jargon, 2018). After the public relations fallout from the 2018 arrests, Starbucks rolled out a company-wide policy that “any person who enters our spaces…regardless of whether they make a purchase, is considered a customer.” At the same time, Schultz also said “We don’t want to become a public bathroom, but we’re going to make the right decision”, demonstrating that private social infrastructure often prefers to stay in the gray area between public and private until it is forced to pick a side (Jargon, 2018).

## The Effects of Suburbanization on Social Infrastructure

In the United States, the quality and quantity of social infrastructure varies drastically from place to place. One spatial typology that has historically stood out as a wasteland for

social infrastructure has been the American suburb. The trend of suburbanization in the United States traces its roots back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when railroads and streetcars made it possible for families to move to the outskirts of cities and commute to the city center for work (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2011). Suburbanization saw runaway popularity, however, following World War II and a culmination of social, governmental, and technological factors. During this time, the federal government instituted subsidized mortgage loan programs that put home ownership and the "American Dream" within the reach of millions of families. Coupled with the "increasing sophistication of large-scale production builders like Levitt and Sons", over a million new homes a year were constructed during this time period to keep pace with the new demand for single-family residences (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2011). The Federal Highway Acts of 1944 and 1956 funded the roads needed to connect these neighborhoods to existing cities, and the decreasing cost of automobiles enabled the average family to buy the vehicles to fill these roads (Lange, 2022).

Developers and policy makers alike, in their rush to catapult millions toward the American Dream in the suburbs, managed to neglect a key piece of the puzzle of societal functionality and human well-being. While homes, grocery stores, employment centers, and other necessities for a comfortable existence quickly cropped up, social infrastructure (both public and private) was markedly missing from the new landscape. In the words of author Alexandre Lange: "What most initial postwar development failed to incorporate… was the type of central—and centering—space that had been part of human civilization since its earliest origins. In subsidizing the home and the road, the government failed to subsidize a place to gather. Something essential to human nature had been missed: People love to be in public with other people" (Lange, 2022). The environments born out of these conditions were often sprawling, low-density, and planned around the preeminence of the private household, not a reverence for the public sphere.

Regarding the physical form of the suburbs, Dunham-Jones and Williamson qualify it as one dominated by private buildings with segregated uses. These single use buildings and the suburban zoning codes that perpetuate them put impermeable boundaries between residential, commercial, and office spaces, blocking any and all societal benefits that come from

the intermixing of home and public space. Unfettered, poorly planned growth also leads to a "dendritic pattern" of road construction with "dead ends and cul-de-sacs", as opposed to the interconnections found within more urban areas (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2011). The lack of connectivity reinforces a reliance on automobiles for transportation, necessitating the construction of "large surface parking lots surrounding buildings" and further spreading low density development over an ever-increasing area. Satellite images shown below in Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the stark differences between suburban and urban patterns of development, as seen in Macon, Georgia. Dunham-Jones and Williamson argue that the suburban built form inhibits "the development of locally owned third places and opportunities for building the kinds of networks that have traditionally been crucial to building collective social capital and civil society". They also purport that "the segregation of uses, increased auto dependency, standardization of development products, and dominance of chain retailers combined to produce a landscape that is neither physically nor socially well connected to the local community or environment" (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2011). Indeed, a sizeable hole was left in not only the physical, but also social fabric of suburban areas that provided few and far-flung chances for the formation of social cohesion.

*Figure 4: 2022 Satellite Image of West Macon's Suburban Form. Source: Google Earth*

*Figure 5: 2022 Satellite Image of Downtown Macon's Urban Form. Source: Google Earth*

## The Shopping Mall as Social Infrastructure

It was in this context that Austrian architect Victor Gruen devised the first climate-controlled, indoor shopping mall. The Southdale Center, opened in Edina, Minnesota in 1956, was Gruen's answer to the lack of social infrastructure that he observed in suburban areas. The existing cities and towns at the time had traditional downtown areas that had grown up organically over time and served as de facto nodes of social infrastructure. The suburbs, on the other hand, had manifested so rapidly and with such a sprawling form that no such downtowns existed. Gruen's indoor mall concept was intended to "become downtown, with its own plazas and lanes, post offices and cafes, play spaces and, of course, shops" (Lange, 2022). Inspired by the public squares of his hometown of Vienna, Gruen sought to create a space that would encourage social behavior, whether in the form of shopping for a new dress or sending a letter at the in-house post office. The key design concept at play was the re-creation of "an updated version of the pedestrian districts found in historic city centers in Europe" where private life was encouraged to mix with the social sphere (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2011).

Unfortunately, Gruen's original model of indoor shopping malls as complexes mixing civic and commercial functions, morphed over time and space to shed most non-shopping uses. The rose-colored view of shopping malls as the temples of community that Gruen initially imagined is tempered by the acknowledgement that most indoor shopping mall developers were motivated solely by profits and not a desire to strengthen suburban social fabric. Mall developers found they could forgo the traditional civic uses of a downtown area and focus exclusively on the shops that we associate with malls today (Lange, 2022). Despite ditching the mix of uses that Gruen originally envisioned, shopping malls failed to devolve into the "contained, concentrated circuses of commerce and consumption" that some critics thought they would become (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2011). "Indoor food courts, fountains, and sittable steps" were among some of the design features present in malls across the country to encourage lingering and increase social interactions (Lange, 2022). Throughout the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century, indoor shopping malls continued to offer a comfortable space for suburban residents to reinforce the three core domains of social cohesion.

Building on the intent-vs-use argument of suburban shopping malls, research by Vanessa Parlette and Deborah Cowen of the University of Toronto suggests that, regardless of the intent of developers, suburban mall spaces grew into the role of social infrastructure in areas with few alternatives present to fill the need:

> *Enclosed malls, as the residents of Southeast Scarborough in Toronto's eastern reaches were well aware, often became community space. While privately owned and managed, enclosed malls in inner suburbs are at times the only indoor spaces that offer some degree of public access. In spite of the powerful histories of racism, exclusion and surveillance that characterize these 'cathedrals of consumption', enclosed malls came to function as meeting spaces, de facto childcare centers, shelters, Tai Chi studios and drop-in centers. Indeed, spatial practice always escapes and exceeds the conceptions of designers and managers.*

Echoing the sentiments of Bryant Simon, Parlette and Cowen touch on the fact that when private social infrastructure is both marketed and used extensively as community space, the lines between private and public begin to blur. This becomes especially true in low income and minority communities that "depend more heavily on malls for social reproduction as well as recreation and consumption" (Parlette & Cowen, 2011). Despite being privately owned and managed, communities across the country have come to rely on their local shopping malls as physical places where public life can be carried out. It is through this "spatial practice", that Parlette and Cowen say communities make informal claims on the private social infrastructure of the shopping mall.

## Case Study: The Redevelopment of the Macon Mall

### Macon Mall Historic Context

In order to discuss the importance of the Macon Mall in the social fabric of West Macon, a quick look at the mall's predecessor is necessary. Constructed in 1961, the Westgate Mall was the first enclosed shopping mall to be built in the state of Georgia and represented an early adoption of Gruen's groundbreaking design. This mall, seen below in Figure 6, introduced Middle Georgians to the airconditioned luxury of shopping unencumbered by the elements. So great was the area's appetite for this new form of suburban consumption that when the Macon Mall was built less than 2 miles away in 1975, most shoppers had zero reservations taking their business to the newer, larger mall (Reese, 2019). While the Westgate Mall was West Macon's first social infrastructure heartthrob, the quick transition to the Macon Mall only 14 years later highlights the sprawling, shortsighted nature of suburban development in the area.

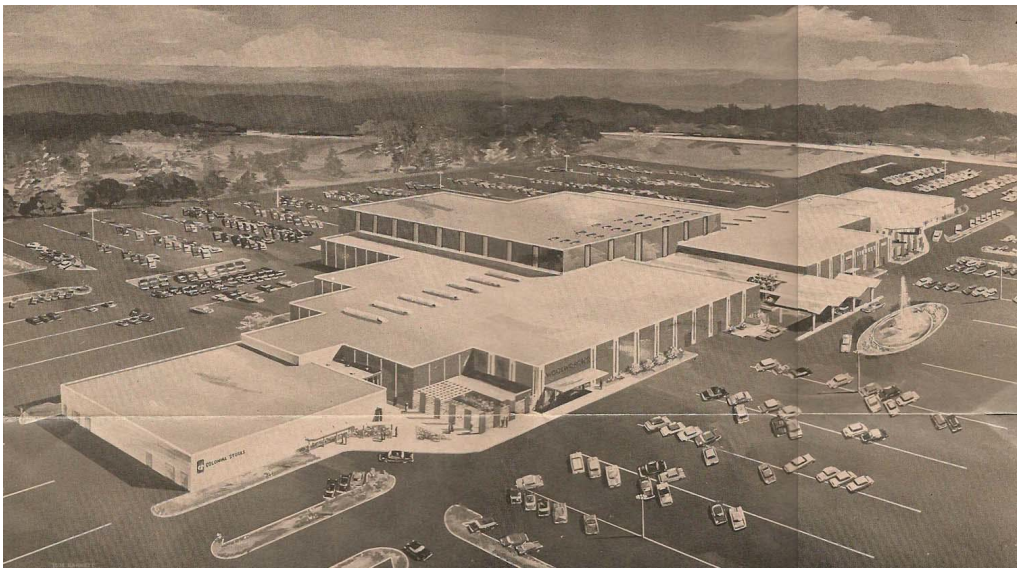

*Figure 6: Aerial rendering of the Westgate Shopping Mall, circa 1961. Source: (Sky City Retail History, 2010)*

Coming about during the second wave of enclosed mall construction in the United States, the Macon Mall continued the tradition of private social infrastructure in suburban West Macon. What set the Macon Mall apart from the Westgate Mall, however, were the massive anchor stores that it housed, including Davidson's, JCPenney, Sears, and Belk Matthews departments stores (Sheednomics, 2020). These stores served as the main regional attraction for the property and allowed smaller auxiliary stores inside to benefit from the traffic they brought in. The interior look of the mall was curated with fountains, indoor greenery, and thoughtful lighting choices to give customers an appealing and comfortable shopping experience. Virtually unrivalled in its bid for regional retail dominance, the Macon Mall experienced profound success during its first 30 years of operation. In 1997, an ambitious expansion that involved the rerouting of a sizeable creek saw the property increase its retail footprint by over 400,000 square feet and add the upscale anchors of Dillard's and Parisian (Sheednomics, 2020). It was during this time that the Macon Mall held the title of "Largest Mall in Georgia" and served as the unequivocal center of social space for the entire Middle Georgia region.

While the promise of trendy clothes and the latest gadgets initially brought many to the mall, the engaging social atmosphere had an undeniable allure for many Maconites and Middle Georgians. For some, the mall represented a publicly accessible space where they could simply observe the hum of human activity in what Layton and Latham refer to as the "co-presence practice of spending time in the proximity of others". One Macon Mall regular recalls a pleasant memory of "Seeing the people enjoying themselves as they ate or just watching people enjoy family" (WMAZ, 2017). For others, the mall provided a convenient space to strengthen their social networks and make new connections. Mitzi H. remembers meeting many new people while working at the mall and refers to them "like mall family" (WMAZ, 2017). In certain cases, time spent at the mall resulted not just in friendships and acquaintances, but even with some shoppers finding love in the busy social fray of the mall:

> *Even though we attended the same college, I actually met my husband [in the Macon Mall] in the Fall of 1982. My roommate and I were out shopping (which we did often), and he was coming out of the flower store that was upstairs by the Macy's entrance. He knew [my roommate] and she introduced us. – Faye K.W.* (WMAZ, 2017)

With its vast food court and ample areas for lingering and socializing, the Macon Mall served as an essential space for the production of social cohesion in West Macon.

In 2008, a slurry of factors culminated to spell the beginning of the end of the Macon Mall's dominance. Among these, mismanagement of the mall property, new local competition, turbulent national retail trends, and area safety concerns represented the most pressing issues faced by the previously indomitable mall. Purchased in 2004 by the Lightstone Group, the mall was used as collateral for a loan that the company later defaulted on in 2008, forcing the Macon Mall into foreclosure proceedings and sending a ripple of doubt through the tenant properties of the mall (Sheednomics, 2020). It was at this same time that an upscale lifestyle center called The Shoppes at River Crossing opened its doors in North Macon. In a manner eerily reminiscent of the Macon Mall's original usurpation of the Westgate Mall, The Shoppes at River Crossing successfully courted the Dillard's anchor store away from its original space, leaving a large vacancy in the newly constructed expansion. The Parisian department store that

co-anchored the new expansion was consolidated with the Belk already in the mall, leading to its shuttering (Sheednomics, 2020). At just over 10 years old, the newly expanded wing of the Macon Mall found itself anchorless, with two massive, lifeless storefronts to usher in a new era of decline for the entire mall property.

Perhaps the most visceral factor contributing to the Macon Mall's fall was the reputation it took on around this time as no longer being safe for visitors. A few highly publicized fights in the late 2000's, such as one full-on brawl in the food court, coupled with a general perception of increased crime in the area, was more than enough to deter shoppers from visiting (Malloy, 2007). According to a 13WMAZ article on the subject, comments such as "I heard it was taken over by gangs" and "It was not a place I wanted my family to shop" became common place in discourse over the mall's safety (Butler, 2017). The article then goes on to attest that the incidences of crime reported at the Macon Mall were actually lower than those at The Shoppes at River Crossing and the nearby power center of Eisenhower Crossing. Unfortunately for the mall, though, the reputation stuck and lost shoppers and revenue did not return (Butler, 2017). Whether the dangerous reputation was originally warranted or not, incidences of violence have continued to plague the Macon Mall, including the shooting death of a teen in the food court in 2021 (O'Donnell, 2021).

The downhill surge from these combined factors in the late 2000's only gathered momentum as the years ticked by, with the current Macon Mall sitting at a fraction of its peak occupancy rate. The vacancy of the expanded wing led to the decision by mall management in 2011 to demolish the entire wing in an effort to decrease vacant retail space (13WMAZ, 2020). All 4 of the remaining anchor stores shuttered over the following decade, with Burlington Coat Factory as the only new anchor store to take up residency (Trawick, 2015). To their credit, the Macon Mall's current owner, Hull Property Group, has done an admirable job keeping the inside of the mall looking as lively as possible. The well-maintained lighting illuminates tastefully walled up empty store fronts adorned with high quality prints of Macon's natural and historic beauty, as seen in Figure 7 below.


*Figure 7: Macon Mall Interior, 2023*

While today's Macon Mall sits as a shadow of its former self, in both physical size and visitation numbers, the space tenaciously continues to fill the suburban need for social infrastructure in West Macon. As explained by one of the mall's security guards, groups of two's and three's from the area line up outside the mall's door every morning to stroll the halls for exercise (Macon Mall Security, personal communication, February 18, 2023). These groups utilize the mall's well-lit, climate-controlled atmosphere to walk, talk, and engage their community in a space they have claimed through decades of use. While the fountains and greenery may be long gone from budget cuts and renovations of old, the benches and a small section of food court seating still remain for patrons to linger and socialize. The fact that the property no longer draws crowds from across the Middle Georgia region, or even from across Macon itself, suggests that the those who still gather in the Macon Mall may do so out of convenience and are likely residents of West Macon. With scant other options for the reinforcement of social cohesion present in the decidedly suburban fabric of the area, a redevelopment of the Macon Mall represents an exciting opportunity to enhance an integral piece of social infrastructure for West Maconites.

**Recommendations:**

The following set of recommendations for the redevelopment of the Macon Mall focuses not only on how to preserve, but also to maximize the space's potential as vital social infrastructure for the West Macon area. When applicable, these recommendations build upon the current redevelopment plans initiated by the Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority, insofar as they pursue social infrastructural goals. One of the leading themes woven throughout these proposals will be a consideration of the resiliency of the space to endure economic forces that may threaten purely market driven private social infrastructure, such as traditional third spaces. Having spent all its life relying on private funding to survive, the Macon Mall has always been particularly vulnerable to the whims of the competitive market. By intertwining the civic uses of a library, greenspace, and recreational spaces, the Macon Mall can gain the stability that municipally funded institutions typically enjoy. With the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the mall being some of the most disadvantaged and least tax-generating in the county, an upfront investment in the social infrastructure of the mall space stands to yield tax producing dividends from the inevitable socio-economic benefits that come from bolstering social cohesion in the area.

The first recommendation for what should be installed in the Macon Mall vacant retail space is a fully equipped library. West Macon previously had a library branch located 4 miles west of the Macon Mall, but after that branch closed in 2017, much of the West Macon area was left without an accessible option (Beimfohr, 2016). It should be noted that while the Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority plans to construct a library annex in their redevelopment of the mall property, it is unclear what level of services and programming will be offered by the new location. The new annex will likely be a smaller branch location without the full services of a main branch, such as the Washington Memorial Library near downtown (Fabian, 2022). However, it would be a significant missed opportunity not to use the momentum of the impending mall redevelopment project to construct a full-service, full-size library in the mall space. As Klinenberg purports, "The library is among the most crucial forms of

social infrastructure we have", and the provision of a high-quality library branch to enhance the social infrastructure provided by the Macon Mall space would be well worth the investment.

The new library design should be based upon existing 21st century library models, such as the newly constructed Norcross Branch Library in Gwinnett County, GA. The Norcross Branch, opened in 2021 and pictured in Figure 8 below, houses the stacks of books seen in traditional libraries, but also includes a "120-person meeting room, study rooms, computer stations, and learning labs with space for 3D printing and video recording" (Wilkins, 2021). This mixture of services is what allows the Norcross Branch to serve a diverse community with varying needs and provide "multiple opportunities for children to learn and adults to gather and get creative or address local issues" (Yeomans, 2021). Just like all public libraries in the United States, the Norcross Branch is open to anyone and free from financial barriers to entry and use. Unlike most public libraries, however, many of the branches within the Gwinnett County Public Library system offer "open access" hours, where library card holders are granted access to the library via an automated security system during times when library staff are not working. The open access program stretches the effective hours of the Norcross Branch from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day of the week, providing truly unparalleled access to a crucial community resource (Wilkins, 2021).


*Figure 8: Norcross Branch Library interior. Source: (Wilkins, 2021)*

The addition of a modern, full-service library in the pattern of the Norcross Branch would be an invaluable asset to the West Macon area. Especially benefiting from this investment would be the area's youth and elderly populations. A safe, comfortable space for teens to socialize, work on homework, or pursue personal projects is desperately needed in the area's sprawling yet barren landscape. "Designated teen spaces" within the library could help foster a sense of belonging and encourage interaction with other area teens (Klinenberg, 2018). Additionally, access to maker spaces, computer labs with creative software and internet access, and teen-targeted programming could provide the resources to help teens find a desirable career path. A library in the Macon Mall would provide an additional set of social benefits to elderly citizens in the area. Many senior citizens living in neighborhoods like Unionville in West Macon are forced to endure gang violence that can erupt "in a matter of seconds or minutes" in their communities (Kirklen, 2018). With no safe place to socialize, seniors often find themselves isolated alone at home. A new library in the Macon Mall would provide a secure place for seniors to engage in conversation with friends and spend time in proximity to others. Klinenberg asserts that libraries are integral to ensuring the elderly population maintains "physical health and social vitality", especially when targeted programming like "book clubs, karaoke sessions, and video bowling leagues" are incorporated into library services (Klinenberg, 2018).

Another way in which the physical form of the Macon Mall can be enhanced to promote social cohesion for visitors is through a greening effort of the parking lot surrounding the mall. Like many enclosed shopping malls constructed in the 20$^{th}$ century, the Macon Mall is surrounded by surface parking that dwarfs the footprint of the building itself. This ocean of asphalt was previously justified as a necessity to accommodate peak demand for spaces on the busiest shopping days of the year (Kobos, 2015). As established, the Macon Mall is well past anything remotely resembling the attendance levels it once had anticipated on popular shopping days like "Black Friday", leaving the vast majority of its parking lot empty and unused. Transforming this desolate, impermeable surface into publicly accessible greenspace would be a cost-effective approach to enhancing the social infrastructure offerings of the mall property.

Greenspace in a suburban setting can qualify as “parks and public open spaces as well as street trees and greenery” (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). In this context, greenspace can be strategically added to the existing Macon Mall parking lot to increase social interactions on the property as a whole. According to Twohig-Bennett and Jones, contact with greenspace is one of the factors that “enable[s] people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and developing to their maximum potential” and is an important component of a healthy community. Pocket parks and assorted greenspace installments on the parking lot grounds would provide ready access to a variety of such spaces for West Maconites to linger and socialize. Whether in the form of “fleeting and temporary encounters”, “regular informal socializing with known others”, or “formal and coordinated action between the same people over a longer period of time”, interactions in community greenspaces on the mall property have the potential to “nurture a sense of security, familiarity and community” (Dinnie et al., 2013).

Certain plots can also be earmarked for use as learning gardens for local elementary school children. Three elementary schools, Hartley, Veterans, and Union are located within three driving miles of the Macon Mall. School partnerships could allow student fieldtrips to these learning gardens, in which students can cultivate vegetables, civic engagement, and a connection with their environment. A review of the Jones Valley Teaching Farm, a hands-on farming partnership with the Birmingham City School System, found that the program enhanced leadership traits, relationships with other students, and entrepreneurial skills (Fifolt & Wiggins, 2021). The cooperative aspect of this program, coupled with a hands-on connection to the natural environment, provided students with a valuable and unique experience. Opportunity for these types of socially cohesive benefits exist in the regreening of the Macon Mall parking lot.

A final recommended use for incorporation into the Macon Mall redevelopment is recreational facilities with specific programming for targeted age groups. This recommendation aligns with and builds upon the current Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority plans of constructing a 32 court pickleball facility within a vacant anchor store space. The UDA’s plans to create the “PickleMall” include hosting “players from all over the world” for

tournament play, in addition to running after school programs for children (Ruiz, 2022). The inclusion of this recreational space will provide important social and physical stimulation for West Macon residents. In addition to pickleball courts, it would be advantageous to construct an exercise area with general workout equipment, as well as a flexible gymnasium space to be used for a variety of sports and physical activities. The Town Center at Aurora, a redeveloped mall site in the suburbs of Denver, CO, provides a useful blueprint for retrofitting empty mall anchor spaces to accommodate multi-purpose recreational facilities. The company Fieldhouse USA moved into a former Sears anchor location in the indoor mall and constructed a trampoline park, mini golf course, ropes course, volleyball courts, and basketball courts, as seen in Figure 9 (Aurora, 2023). With offerings of both youth and adult athletics programs, the Fieldhouse USA installation in the mall provides a valuable community resource.

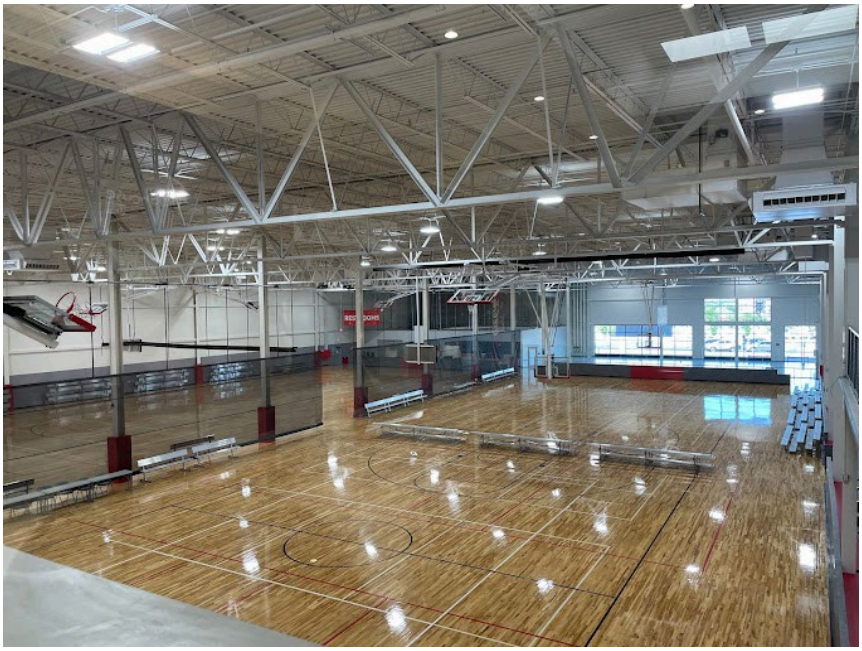

*Figure 9: Fieldhouse USA in Town Center at Aurora. Source: (Mineault, 2022)*

The age demographic that stands to benefit most from the construction of recreational facilities in the Macon Mall is the youth sector. According to research by the Fight Crime: Invest

in Kids nonprofit group, “the prime time for violent juvenile crime is 3 PM to 6 PM”, which is also the time juveniles are most likely to become victims of violent crime or be involved in a car accident (Newman et al., 2000). After-school programs, such as those that could be offered by a recreational facility in the Macon Mall, are a proven method to reduce school children’s involvement in these types of dangerous situations. Structured programs that fill the time immediately following school release help students to “develop social skills and learn to get along with their peers,' attributes which are strongly associated with school achievement, adult success, and reduced risk of delinquency and crime” (Newman et al., 2000). Recreational opportunities in the Macon Mall can help to foster these skills in West Macon youth and increase overall levels of social cohesion in the area.

Additional studies conducted by Columbia University researchers show there may be a link between recreational activity levels and lower violence rates among juveniles. The mechanisms thought to be at work are an increase in psychological benefits, such as self-esteem and reduced anxiety and depression, that “may aid in violence prevention” (Romo et al., 2017). The regular and healthy socialization of juveniles with each other through recreational activities is an important benefit that the social infrastructure of the Macon Mall could provide. Participation in team sports in the mall space could act as a compelling factor to combat social isolation among area youth and bolster social networks and levels of interpersonal trust. The immediate benefits of including recreational facilities in the Macon Mall redevelopment are compelling and should be seriously considered as a valuable social infrastructure enhancement of the space.

## Conclusion

As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said long ago, “Change is the only constant in life.” None know this better than the neighborhoods of West Macon and their residents. The unstoppable tide of development washed over the area from the mid to late 20$^{th}$ Century and just as quickly receded again, leaving the shells of once vibrant commercial centers in its wake.

Just like the Westgate Mall before it, the Macon Mall served as a hub of social life and social cohesion in a suburban environment otherwise starved of such infrastructure. It was a destination for people of all ages to make new acquaintances, strengthen their personal networks, or simply bask in the hum of the social interactions taking place all around them. The quiet halls of the mall today serve as a reminder of what has been lost in the community, but also represent a unique opportunity for the space to take on a new life rooted in civic functions. An adaptive reuse of the mall space that transitions it from purely commercial to a mixture of uses promises to be a powerful revitalizing force in West Macon. A full-service library complete with targeted programming, teen spaces, and a modern layout would pay dividends as essential social infrastructure in the area. Additionally, the inclusion of greenspace represents a cost efficient and holistic approach to increasing the social cohesion capacity of the property. Equally impactful would be the construction of a recreational facility within the mall to promote group sports and physical activity for local residents. Whether or not it was initially envisioned as such, the Macon Mall has always functioned as social infrastructure. By focusing more deliberately on this facet of its character, the mall can and should be redeveloped into the resilient node of social life that West Macon deserves.

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