

EAT, Shop, Play & Work

ALL IN
ONE PLACE

GARDEN STATE GROWING A NEW CROP OF NEXT-GENERATION, MIXED-USE COMMUNITY HUBS

BY DEBRA MILLER

In the 22nd century and beyond, according to a popular sci-fi television series, the future holds that individuals live, work and play all in one place aboard a starship.

That future, on Earth, is now here with places striving to be of mixed-use boasting residences, office, retail and leisure time activities combined into a distinct area. It is a trend that focuses on convenience and socialization over lengthy commutes and a detached social network often found in the suburbs or rural locales.

Bell Works in Holmdel harnesses this concept by incorporating a hybrid of corporate, retail, small business and community space inside one massive, glass-encased structure. At 2 million square feet, the historic former Bell Labs site in this Monmouth County town has been transformed into restaurants, offices, event space, an indoor golf facility, an escape room, a branch of the county library, a Montessori school and even a full-size, indoor basketball court on the open, airy main level. Office tenants here specialize in wealth

management, dental services, employment staffing and telecommunications testing, to name a few. One of the largest corporate tenants is International Flavors & Fragrances (IFF).

This repurposed facility is a self-contained “metroburb,” a term first coined by Bell Works developer Ralph Zucker, president of Somerset Development. Think of it as an urban hub that simplifies daily life without sacrificing expectations. Workers at the many organizations and businesses renting here can linger a bit longer to shop, relax and dine past quitting time. Fitness classes, weekly farmers markets and other events are held here regularly. It is a little metropolis in suburbia that is open to the public every day from 6 a.m. to midnight.

“When I walked into the (former Bell Labs) building, it hit me,” said Zucker about envisioning the space. “There was this quarter-mile-long Main Street, an internal pedestrian street we now call ‘On the Block.’”

His design inspiration came from a trip to Turin, Italy, touring the Lingotto building in Via Nizza — the former home of the five-story



An aerial night photograph of the Bell Works building in Holmdel, New Jersey. The building is a large, multi-story structure with a glass-encased facade, illuminated from within, showing a warm yellow glow. It is situated next to a body of water, with a green lawn and trees in the foreground. The sky is dark blue. Two inset photographs are placed in the upper left and center of the image. The inset in the top left shows an interior view of a restaurant or cafe with people seated at tables. The inset in the center shows a wide-angle view of the building's interior atrium, featuring multiple levels with glass railings and a large, open space. A text box is located in the upper right, and another text box is in the bottom right.

Restaurants, offices, event space, an indoor golf facility and an escape room highlight some of the features of Bell Works.

Bell Works in Holmdel incorporates a hybrid of corporate, retail, small business and community space inside one massive, glass-encased structure.

Photos courtesy of Bell Works

Fiat manufacturing plant that now comprises a concert hall, theater, convention center, shopping arcade and hotel.

"We've become, really, what we set out to be," Zucker said. "Bell Works is not an office building with a bunch of amenities. It's really a little downtown. We've become the place where people get together."

Surrounding the building is new housing constructed as a complement to this bustling enclave, creating a neighborly atmosphere between the residences and Bell Works.

Other developers ideate about building luxury apartments, offices and open green space close to established shopping centers. Unibail-Rodamco-Westfield (URW) proposes to create an amenity-rich downtown vibe in Paramus on a 34-acre parking lot tract adjacent to the Westfield Garden State Plaza in Bergen County. Planning has been ongoing for a while, but the developer expects to break ground on 550 luxury apartments in 2024. It could be an ideal place for those who are downsizing but want to stay close to the familiar. Future plans look to include a major transit center as well.

"It fits into our thoughts about the future of the malls and the creation of landmark destinations," said Stephen Fluhr, senior vice president of development for URW, the commercial real estate company that owns the mall. "It's a really exciting program, and it's really hard to do, honestly."

The trend also extends to Sayreville, in Middlesex County, where North American Properties is redeveloping the 400-acre former National Lead waterfront property into a community of retail, restaurants, residences, hotels and workspace, known as Riverton. The first step in the project will be to break ground for retail store Bass Pro Shops by the end of this year.

About 7 miles west from there, the city of New Brunswick doesn't lack options of what to do or where to dine on any given day of the week. The nonprofit New Brunswick City Market was founded in 1987 to tend to the rejuvenation of this premier Central Jersey destination in the county seat. The organization fosters economic growth for the business district by enhancing its visibility to attract both visitors and the city's many apartment dwellers. Several hotels, retail shops and popular restaurants featuring cuisine from around the globe commingle with world-class theaters, live comedy and historical sites. Plus, the NJ Transit train station is only about a 10-minute walk from the city center.

"Over the years, I've had the pleasure to experience the extraordinary growth and redevelopment the district has attained, and continue to work with the businesses to build on a framework that exceeds my expectations year after year," said Pam Stefanek, executive director of the organization. "I am also very proud of our staff, the board and its committee members who volunteer their valuable time to help make New Brunswick what it is today."

Then, there are those municipalities that will reward residents who support neighborhood vendors by discounting their property taxes when they shop for goods and services in town. Free membership cards incentivize residents who live in these towns to shop locally. The first to implement such a program was Marlboro Township, but other burghs have followed suit, such as Hillsborough, West Orange, Haddonfield and Bridgewater.

In Essex County, Newark instituted such an economic development initiative to encourage residents and visitors to frequent local businesses with the Shop Newark program. The platform offers a property tax credit with each transaction at participating merchants when a registered membership card is presented. That, combined with the growth of mixed-use revitalization projects in New Jersey's largest city, makes the live, work, play model even more alluring when museums, a performing arts center, sports arena, hotels, offices, retail establishments, restaurants and convenient transit options also beckon.

According to a study released by the International Council of Shopping Centers, nearly four-fifths of U.S. adults would consider residing in "live, work, shop, play" environments that have a variety of housing, workplaces, dining and recreational outlets for entertainment all within proximity to each other.

As many of these projects rise from the Garden State landscape, residents are primed to reap the rewards. ❖



The nonprofit New Brunswick City Market was founded in 1987 to tend to the rejuvenation of this premier Central Jersey destination in the county seat.

Photo courtesy of New Brunswick City Market

Unibail-Rodamco-Westfield proposes to create an amenity-rich downtown vibe in Paramus on a 34-acre parking lot tract adjacent to the Westfield Garden State Plaza in Bergen County.

Rendering courtesy of Unibail-Rodamco-Westfield



Popular restaurants featuring cuisine from around the globe are part of what makes New Brunswick an ideal spot to eat, shop, work and play.

Photo courtesy of New Brunswick City Market

