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PLANNING MAGAZINE

How the Push to Revive 'Ghost Stores' Can Bring Back Hyperlocal Communities

Vacant corner stores reborn as cafes, markets, and shops connect urban neighbors to fresh food and one another.

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Seven Market & Cafe in Seattle's historic Ravenna neighborhood is the type of corner store that the city is working to bring back. Photo courtesy of Sam Kraft.

March 27, 2025

By PATRICK SISSON

Like many during the pandemic in 2020, Jessica Peacock — an education policy advocate in Raleigh, North Carolina — found a hobby to spend her newfound free time. She set sights on reopening Peacock Community Market in the Walnut Terrace neighborhood, a corner store started by her great-grandparents in 1964. Catering to the underserved community nearby, the store was a vital third place and retail space for people of color until it closed in 2011.

Her quest found her embracing the same benefits that have helped spur a modern corner store revival: increased neighborhood connection, improved walkability, and better access to healthy food. However, it also found her running up against the hurdles that make it so hard to bring back these cherished neighborhood institutions.

After spending many months researching Raleigh's zoning code, including how to rezone the property, Peacock realized she wouldn't be able to resurrect the market in its original incarnation. That had been grandfathered in, but reopening the 120-year-old property meant abiding by modern stormwater, environmental, and building codes. By August 2024, she had to let it go.

"Had we stayed open, none of this would have been a problem," Peacock says. "But closing down meant that now we need to adhere to the [current] zoning code."



Jessica Peacock, standing in front of the market her grandparents owned and operated in Raleigh, North Carolina, is working to reopen the corner store despite zoning and permitting challenges.



Generations of the family ran Peacock Community Market. It was known as a vital third space for people of color in the community until it closed in 2011. Photos courtesy of Jessica Peacock.

Like shadows of signs imprinted on brick walls that offer faded memories of an urban past, the remnants of corner stores (<https://www.realtor.com/news/trends/the-abandoned-corner-shops-getting-transformed-into-million-dollar-homes/>) in old residential neighborhoods showcase a bygone building type. They're sometimes even called "ghost corner stores" (<https://www.kuow.org/stories/chasing-the-ghost-corner-stores-of-seattle/>) — the odd, ground-level apartments with too many street-level windows, odd angles, or doors that jut up right against the curb. Many historic urban neighborhoods revolved around these neighborhood markets and cafes, which enhanced the community. "Prior to zoning, corner stores existed everywhere," says Joel Dock, AICP, the planning manager in Louisville, Kentucky. "That's what made a neighborhood a good neighborhood."

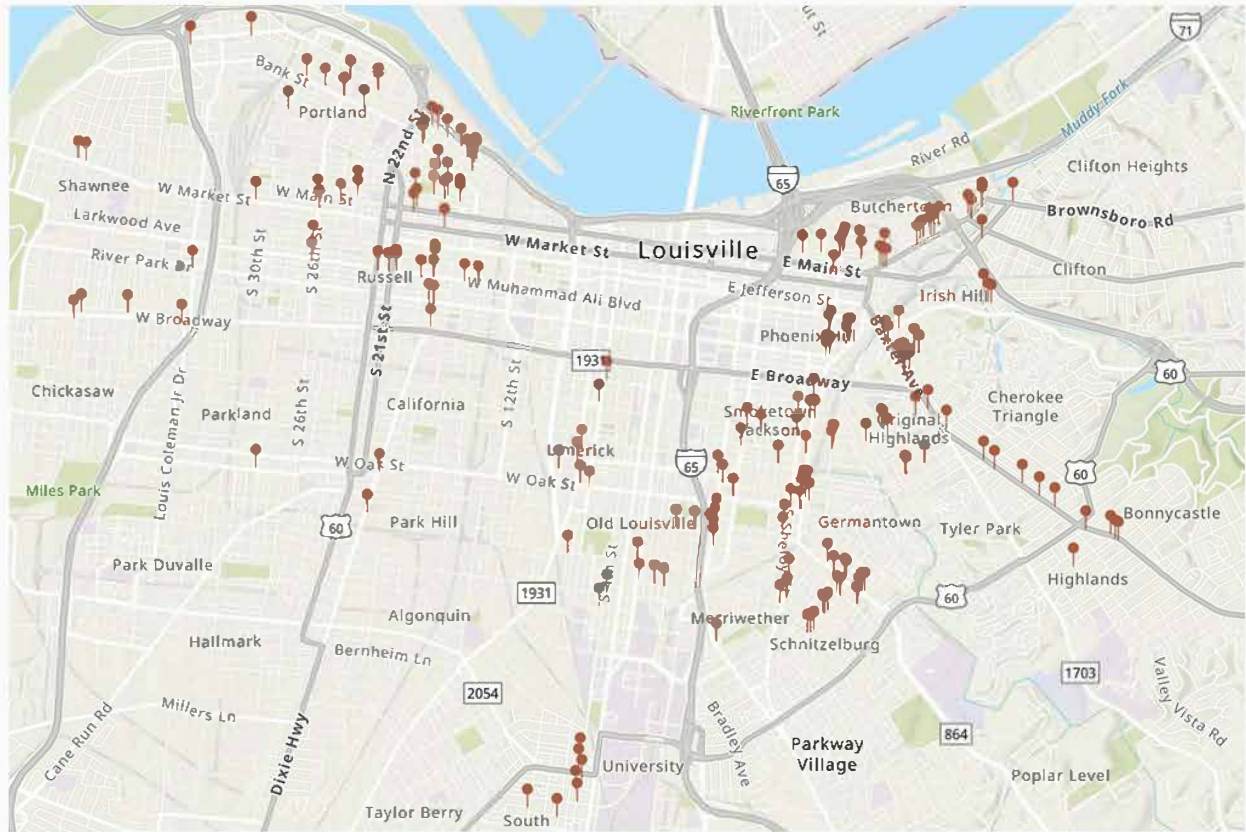
Benefits to reviving community markets

It's estimated (<https://mrsc.org/stay-informed/mrsc-insight/november-2024/corner-stores>) that it takes about 1,000 households to support a small-scale grocery store, making such community resources ideal for lots near already trafficked community spaces like libraries, parks, and schools. Planners like Dock, who are inspired by visions of 15-minute cities (and [20-minute suburbs](https://planning/2023/winter/meet-the-15-minute-citys-cousin-the-20-minute-suburb/) ([/planning/2023/winter/meet-the-15-minute-citys-cousin-the-20-minute-suburb/](https://planning/2023/winter/meet-the-15-minute-citys-cousin-the-20-minute-suburb/))) and more close-knit, walkable neighborhoods, want to restore or construct new versions of these markets.

These unique historic buildings served a key function, says Patrick Piuma, director of the Urban Design Studio at the University of Louisville, who led a project (<https://www.udstudio.org/projects/corner-store-mapping-project>) that mapped and documented dozens of historic store locations in Louisville. Reviving the right one can help activate a neighborhood, a process he calls "urban acupuncture." One example in Louisville is [Hauck's Handy Store](https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2022/07/07/hauck-s-handy-store-to-reopen-as-bar-and-restaurant-) (<https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2022/07/07/hauck-s-handy-store-to-reopen-as-bar-and-restaurant->), which was sold by the original owner, George, in 2019 when he was 99 years old. According to Piuma, the space was reimagined as a bar and restaurant that continues the corner store spirit by remaining a community gathering space. Another example is [Monnik Brewery](https://www.monnikbeer.com/about) (<https://www.monnikbeer.com/about>). The building was built in the 1920s and was at various times a bakery, grocery store, and several iterations of cafes. It had sat vacant for nearly two years before the new owner, Brian Holton, purchased the space at auction in 2012.

Corner Stores as Cornerstones

The Urban Design Studio at the University of Louisville is leading a corner store mapping project. The map tracks the current state, condition, and year built of such businesses.



A map (above) showing the location of historic corner stores in Louisville, Kentucky. Below, corner stores mapped in the project, Webb's Market and Deli (left) and the local barbershop, Derby City Chop Shop. Source: [Louisville Corner Store Mapping Project \(https://www.udstudio.org/projects/corner-store-mapping-project\)](https://www.udstudio.org/projects/corner-store-mapping-project), University of Louisville's Urban Design Studio.



Corner stores also can play key roles in improving nutrition and local food access. Nyssa Entrekin, associate director of community-based programming for the Food Trust in Philadelphia, says the organization's Healthy Corner Store Initiative (<https://thefoodtrust.org/what-we-do/corner-stores/>) provides refrigerators and healthy food options for hundreds of locations across Philadelphia and parts of New Jersey, helping these community hubs offer significantly better food options for lower-income shoppers.

Planners have long sung the praises of corner stores, "because they support a lot of great things that we also support, like compact growth, transportation options, socializing with neighbors and friends, and even food security, if it includes healthy options," says Lisa Pool, AICP, a planner and public policy consultant at the Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) in Seattle. "When the pandemic hit, even more people realized the value in these smaller, closer opportunities to meet our daily needs."

Ways to restore the corner store

Efforts to legalize and expand (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-10-02/corner-stores-mount-a-comeback-in-residential-neighborhoods>) corner stores have taken off in recent years in Seattle. The city is seeking to include corner stores in its larger comprehensive plan, One Seattle (<https://www.seattle.gov/opcd/one-seattle-plan>), which will be voted on by city councilmembers later this year. These initiatives seek to reverse successive zoning and building codes that have rendered such projects not feasible and made it almost a requirement for neighborhood residents to have a car to get groceries. While the nation has more than 150,000 so-called convenience stores, (<https://www.convenience.org/Research/Convenience-Store-Fast-Facts-and-Stats/FactSheets/IndustryStoreCount>) only a relative handful are realistically walkable for most shoppers.

The postwar growth of autocentric planning led to stricter, more homogenous zoning — separating once intermingled residential and commercial uses — and saw these stores go out of style and close up shop. Compared to their counterparts in nations like Germany, where research has shown that allowing different building types to be integrated into mostly residential neighborhoods (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01944360708978524?journalCode=rjpa20>) and a legacy of ultra-local retail has been supported, U.S. planners snuffed out the opportunity to weave small shops and cafes into residential areas. The result: reduced overall neighborhood vibrancy.

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The former Sunset Hill Green Market, described as "a hidden gem" in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood, was an essential corner store market for Seattle residents. It offered fresh produce, healthy foods, and crafts. Photo by Harry Cheadle/*Eater Seattle*.



When Alex Johnstone (left) and David Rothstein heard that the local market was in danger of closing, they dug into their personal savings and started a GoFundMe account to open Salmonberry Goods, a bakery and grocery store, in the space. Photo courtesy of Salmonberry Goods.

Dock believes that many of the older stores grandfathered in through the '60s and '70s closed during the '80s as economic and antitrust policy shifts (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/12/food-deserts-robinson-patman/680765/>) favored big businesses and chains. Those that have survived in older neighborhoods have often become beloved local icons.

Planners have been at the forefront of trying to bring these stores back and reform zoning codes that would otherwise keep corner stores shuttered. Spokane, Washington, helped kick off contemporary efforts to restore neighborhood retail in 2017 with a code change that legalized historic locations, despite conflicting contemporary regulatory barriers.

In Seattle, the city's planning department heard from the public that they wanted these small businesses nearby and more accessible, says Brennon Staley, a strategic advisor on housing who's working on zoning changes. The new plan is also part of a larger vision for what neighborhoods could be, since it redefines single-family neighborhoods as urban neighborhoods.

Cities seeking these changes should start with broader city planning and zoning policies, like comprehensive plans, says Pool. That will let planners foster neighborhood-level retail within the larger planning paradigm. Next, municipalities should make sure standards aren't too restrictive, such as parking requirements or impact and connection fees that add additional hurdles to making these small businesses financially viable.

A permissive structure is also needed to get these businesses off the ground. Leveraging Historic Tax Credits can help projects pencil out. Staley says that building new, street-level retail in residential neighborhoods can be cost-prohibitive, so it may be more feasible to alter zoning and regulations to allow potential shop owners to start something in a converted garage. Such approaches are sometimes referred to as "[accessory commercial units](https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2023/8/11/the-death-of-the-neighborhood-grocery-store) (<https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2023/8/11/the-death-of-the-neighborhood-grocery-store>)."

The Spokane approach of starting with legacy locations may help with certain segments of the public concerned about disruption that may come with newly opened stores, says Pool. Adding successful stores slowly builds a case for wider adoption; the city plans to look at expansion during a 2026 update of its comprehensive plan.



Meeting House, a coffee shop inside a century-old property in Spokane, Washington, was reactivated in the community in 2020 after being used as a private residence since the mid-1970s. Images courtesy of Meeting House Coffee Shop.



A child is outside the building in the 1800 block of E. 11th Avenue in the South Perry District, where a grocery store that opened in the 1920s occupied the space for 50 years.



Now a boutique cafe, Meeting House serves as a third place where people in the neighborhood can gather for bingo nights or to enjoy the weather on the dog-friendly outdoor patio free of charge.

In Seattle, proposed legislation takes a different tack, allowing such businesses in new or legacy spots only in specific types of residential zones. It offers more opportunities to expand but also might create more friction in single-family neighborhoods where new retail foot traffic, activity, and lighting could be perceived as a nuisance unless there is effective community outreach and feedback.

Ways to 'make those corners more vital'

In Louisville, Dock says the planning department has had an equity focus over the last five years in seeking to acknowledge the harm that bad planning has done to these retail establishments, and to figure out the right way to rezone to make these types of lots productive again. While citywide shifts to bring back the corner store haven't happened yet, small steps have shown how these kinds of changes can become economic engines and benefit local neighborhoods and entrepreneurs.

In 2022, Louisville allowed childcare centers to use any corner lot that had once been used non-residentially, opening dozens of new potential locations for these essential businesses. "We know we need to look at ways to make those corners more vital," Dock says. "We've done little things here and there, but to do what we want to do with corners is going to be a big initiative."

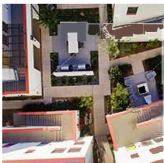
Another aspect of fully using corner stores is what Dock calls micro-industrial, such as catering kitchens or small bottling operations. He argues that adopting a form-based code might help solve many of the challenges of more regimented zoning reform, but he's not sure passage of such a change is currently feasible.

Meanwhile, Pool believes the push for corner stores seems poised to expand. In Washington state, the movement to add missing middle housing and accessory dwelling units to densify neighborhoods has catalyzed interest in small-scale commercial activity to make these areas more livable as they accommodate growth. It's a dynamic playing out across the nation as upzoning policies succeed. Bringing back the classics — whether it's a mid-rise apartment, local café, or convenience store — remains in style.

"Corner stores definitely evoke a lot of nostalgia for people, and I think that that has helped the movement," says Pool. "Nationally, a lot of communities are looking at creating more vibrant communities, and this definitely should be something they consider."

Patrick Sisson, a Los Angeles-based writer and reporter focused on the tech, trends, and policies that shape cities, is a *Planning* contributing writer.

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April 2, 2024



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