The Continuing Transformation of the Big Box: Do your residents stand up and shout “NO!” when another standardized big box store is proposed for your community? As this response becomes more and more common, local governments are becoming increasingly discerning, and a few big box retailers are becoming a bit more flexible. Target stands out as a good example.

By the end of last year, 3 percent of Target’s 1,350 stores nationwide had unusual urban formats, according to New Urban News editor, Rob Steuteville. For example, Target recently built a store on top of a train station. The store has no dedicated parking. In Brooklyn’s Atlantic Terminal, a Target in Queens, New York is going to have 800 housing units on its rooftop. Almost a decade ago, Target began to move into downtowns, occupying buildings formerly owned by declining retail chains including Montgomery Wards on the East Coast and a Robinson’s store in Pasadena. Since then, the company has built stores in downtowns and urban centers throughout the United States.

And recently, an interesting variety of additional formats have appeared. In Gaithersburg and Chicago, one can find two-story Targets with attached, structured parking. In other locations, two-floor stores have been placed on top of structured parking that is lined with small retail businesses. All of the multi-level Targets have cart conveyors that allow shopping carts to ride up or down, next to the customer. And instead of locating in the middle of a large parking lot, many of the unusual Target stores are now built right up to the street with prominent entrances at intersections.

Planners in the City of Davis are extracting other conditions from Target: A proposed 137,000-square-foot design would have to be certified by the U.S. Green Building Council. To protect the city’s existing grocery and drug stores, the city is limiting food and drug products to no more than 10 percent of the floor space. Transplanted trees for the parking lot must come in 15 gallon containers or larger and must grow to cover half the lot by 2021. Bicycle parking must be installed and construction waste must be recycled. Even at that, the City is requiring voter approval and Target is paying for the cost of the election.

Several large drug stores have begun to follow Target’s example, including Walgreens and RiteAide. In Poland, Ohio, Walgreens recently opened a 14,000-square-foot store that is just 20 feet back from the street. The design reflects the village’s Greek revival architecture and features showcase windows that protrude from parts of the exterior. From the exterior, the building looks as though it is two stories, but an extra high ceiling takes advantage of the structure’s height to allow natural light to flow in from the upper windows. A 55-vehicle parking lot sits on one side of the store, behind a decorative fence.

In Davis, California, a RiteAide drug store stands close to the street with room for just one row of vertical parking on either side and in front of the structure. The design of this store differs dramatically from those found in the typical shopping mall. The retailer benefits from foot traffic and bicyclists from nearby UC Davis dormitories.

Only Unless We Have To: Obviously, big box retailers don’t go beyond their customary format unless forced to by city and county governments. A developer became acquainted with the unique Poland, Ohio store and asked Walgreens to duplicate the design in his Fresno development. The company refused. Reportedly, the cost is higher and unless a community has regulations requiring a change from the stock design, America’s largest drugstore chain won’t go along.

The main thing that has changed at Target in the past five years is that the company now knows how to design and build these unique stores and has gotten a handle on the costs. Target’s ideal is to go from design to the completion of construction in one year. Stores beyond the standard format take two to three years and cost more for design, construction and entitlement. Operational costs are also increased when there are two floors. Offsetting these negatives, stores in desirable locations have more customers and generate higher revenues, making up for their added costs.

It does save time if a large retailer knows in advance what is expected of them, or knows in advance not to bother siting in a particular community. Numerous local governments continue to lay out their rules.
Several years ago, the City of Stoughton, Wisconsin, imposed strict design standards, in response to plans announced by Wal-Mart for a super center in a cornfield on the fringe of the town. The city enacted an ordinance capping the size of big-box stores at 110,000-square-feet. It also imposed strict design standards that include varying heights and roof treatments to break up the overall mass; street-facing arcades; windows; diversity in surface texture; clearly defined entrances; landscaped parking and a plan for green space. Both large and small proposed retail projects must submit studies of the impact on traffic, infrastructure, the labor market and commercial vacancy rates. Wal-Mart threatened to go elsewhere. However, reportedly other nearby towns are also adopting stricter design ordinances. It seems clear that to achieve a change in the built-everywhere, standardized, big-box format, communities will have to step up.

Cities Put Limits On Retail Chains: San Francisco has adopted its own unique approach to preserving the retail character of its neighborhoods. County supervisors simply imposed a ban on new formula businesses in portions of Hayes Valley, a reviving neighborhood where independent retailers appear vulnerable and in North Beach, an historic Italian neighborhood that serves as a tourist attraction.

If an owner wants to do business in a protected district, they must “sign a statement that it is not a formula business, subject to perjury” according to the Deputy City Attorney. A formula business is defined as one that has at least 11 locations and “maintains two or more of the following features: a standardized array of merchandise, a standardized façade, a standardized décor and color scheme, uniform apparel, standardized signage, a trademark or a service mark.”

The initial ordinance applies to only two neighborhood commercial districts, and not central shopping areas like downtown’s Union Square. However, residents of two other neighborhoods were given some recourse. In both the Cole Valley and Haight Street neighborhood business districts, any proposed new chain store must undergo a public hearing and review if residents so request.

The little town of Bristol, Rhode Island, pop. 22,000, studied the San Francisco ordinance, and then adopted its own zoning amendment. This community defines a “formula business” as a chain if it has five units. The ordinance applies only in the downtown historic district. The municipality limits retail to a maximum of 2,500 square feet and a width of 65 feet — arrived at by measuring the average storefront in Bristol. The ordinance also addresses design and color schemes that are visible from the sidewalk — both inside and outside.

Almost a year ago, the City of Turlock went a step further and just said, “no, not in our town” to a Wal-Mart proposal to build a super center. Wal-Mart took the city to court. This month, a Stanislaus County Superior Court judge upheld the city ordinance ruling that the goals of the ban — preventing traffic jams and protecting neighborhood grocers — were “reasonably related to the public welfare.”

Community Gardens, Good for More Than Fresh Produce: A recent study undertaken by the New York Center for Law and Economics reveals that community gardens add value to neighboring properties, especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The study observed, “We find the opening of a garden has a statistically significant positive impact on residential properties within 1,000 feet of the garden, and that the impact increases over time. Higher quality gardens have the greatest positive impact. Finally, we find that the opening of a garden is associated with other changes in the neighborhood, such as increasing rates of homeownership, and thus may be serving as catalysts for economic redevelopment of the community.”

The City of Seattle, a municipality that has required community gardens to be installed as part of new low-income housing projects, has also noticed that the result can be a decrease in crime. This is apparently because the residents think of the area as their territory. They guard not only their garden; they are present to provide surveillance to all the surrounding areas.

Streets That Serve Multiple Transportation Modes: Objecting to streets that serve cars alone, a national movement has emerged to “Complete the Streets.” This means designing streets that also serve pedestrians, cyclists, and transit — where it is available. The Coalition consists of an impressive group of diverse national organizations representing seniors, engineers, planners, transit users and the disabled community.

Both the California Department of Transportation and the U.S. Department of Transportation have adopted policies to consider the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists and persons with disabilities in all transportation programming, planning, maintenance, construction and operation. The Thunderhead Alliance, a national coalition of bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups, has taken on the task of getting complete streets implemented in every community. Their guide, titled Thunderhead Alliance Guide to Complete Streets Campaign, is designed for elected and appointed officials, community leaders, and concerned citizens. It is available through all on-line booksellers.