

BUSINESS INSIDER

A world-famous architect has a radical plan for the suburban mall, and it goes way beyond shopping



Italian architect Renzo Piano is known for ambitious projects like the new [Whitney Museum](#), the New York Times building, and the striking California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco.

So it comes as a bit of surprise, to say the least, that the [Renzo Piano Building Workshop](#) is focusing its efforts on a suburban shopping mall in the Bay Area, dubbed the City Center Bishop Ranch. According to Antonio Belvedere, a partner at the workshop, it's part of a plan to reimagine the mall as a new kind of gathering place for the community.

A plan, in other words, to make suburbia feel a little more like urban centers, where gathering places are plentiful. It's an idea that lines up with [New Urbanism](#), a popular

urban design movement that espouses the value of mixed-use and walkable neighborhoods.



In agreeing to do this project, Renzo Piano is taking on a place (the exurbs) and a type of structure (a mall) that most prominent architects would never deign to touch.

But the suburbs deserve quality architecture too. Suburbia isn't going anywhere, despite [plenty of claims](#) to the contrary, and neither are malls. During the 2000s, suburbs actually [grew more quickly](#) than urban areas. And in [wealthy enclaves](#) like Sarasota, Florida, malls are as popular as ever.

Still, the suburban shopping mall hasn't had an easy decade. As online shopping has become more popular, the number of mall visitors has declined. Shopping malls across the U.S. are shuttering. Analytics firm Green Street Advisors predicts that 15% of malls will either [fail or morph into non-retail space](#) in the next decade.

As a place for shopping, malls are starting to outlive their usefulness. But malls — especially outdoor ones — are ideal gathering places in the outskirts of suburbia, where more organic communal spaces are either hard to find or non-existent.

The City Center project, currently in development in the non-descript suburb of San Ramon, "is a place that's meant to be where people are gathering," says Belvedere.

In turn, that means it's a place for San Ramon residents to have chance meetings and even strike up new friendships — a place for the kind of serendipity that communities lose when you have to drive everywhere.



In practice, here's what that looks like: a somewhat typical-looking shopping mall, featuring a pair of minimalist two-story buildings covered in glare-deflecting aluminum. Between the buildings, there is a one-acre enclosed space — a piazza of sorts.

"The piazza is the most important element. Everything is designed around the piazza," says Belvedere.

It's possible that City Center will be a model for future shopping malls, especially as developers search for ways to keep dying malls on life support. But the emphasis on outdoor space poses a problem in in all parts of the country that don't have sunny weather for most of the year.

Think about [New Jersey](#), which has one of the highest concentrations of malls in the country. The amount of rain and snow that the state gets would make a City Center-like experience impossible. Belvedere admits as much.

"California has the perfect weather for it," he says.

It's hard to imagine the City Center as a communal gathering place as long as it remains cut off from its surroundings. Renzo Piano Building Workshop is designing the mall with the expectation that a larger district will pop up around it, with a hotel, housing, and potentially other shops nearby.

"The building becomes a seed in a sense that you put this seed in this place and around this place, things can happen. This place can grow a lot because on the edges you create the right conditions," says Belvedere.

Whether the dream of building an exurban community around a shopping mall can come to fruition remains to be seen — but Renzo Piano has as good a shot as anyone at making it work.