

THREE STRATEGIES FOR REFUELING ABANDONED GAS STATIONS



Depending who you ask, America's first gas station opened in either St. Louis or Seattle only a handful of years following the turn of the 20th century. The automobile was young, but already well on its way to driving straight into the heart of American culture. It didn't take long for gas stations to flood across the country, popping up along major arterial roads, prime hard corner locations, and highway off ramps—wherever traffic and auto access optimized a retailer's pro-forma.

No city, no citizen was immune. In his pastoral quest to sketch the future of a dispersed and auto-centric society, even Frank Lloyd Wright engaged in gas station design. The gas station thus became an aesthetically regrettable but compulsory compound in the refinement of modern urban development.

Some stations have stood the test of time. Reighard's in Atloona, Pennsylvania has been selling gasoline since 1909, making it the oldest American gas station still in operation. But others haven't always fared so well. Aggressive expansion during the U.S.'s post-war suburban boom effectively over positioned low-volume, small square footage stations throughout the country. Now the United States find itself in the midst of a multi-decade decline in the number of gas station retailers open for business across the country. And this trend persists despite metronomic increases in both the nation's population and urban footprint over the same time period.

There's a volatile mix of trends behind the steady evaporation of American gas stations—everything from market consolidation to tightening margins on retail sales. The forces at work are economically epic, structurally complex beasts beyond the remedy of any singular shift in market behavior or regulatory policy.

In general, gas stations tend to play only a tangential role in broader discussions about the sustainability of automobile use and fossil fuels, but in terms of the sustainable city's built environment and local land use decisions, gas stations couldn't play a more central role. There are already local governments grappling with how to reclaim abandoned gas stations, many of which are identified by the EPA as petroleum brownfields that require costly and time-consuming remediation. To a developer, a gas station's highly specialized site layout and environmental risks make for an undesirable and needlessly complicated investment. As a result, many sit along the street boarded up and in disrepair. Forgotten, they are striking, even artistic, in what they symbolize: an old way of life in decline, but a decline that presents a possibility for change in values, purpose, and use.



Drawing upon a handful of North America case studies, here's three strategies for refueling abandoned gas stations:

1. Reuse

There are a number of projects that have thoughtfully reused the footprint of former gas stations. Copper Star Coffee in Phoenix, Arizona is a noteworthy example. Once a small gas station, Copper Star still fuels city residents, but now it's by the cup, not the gallon. The unique architecture, signage, and often prime location of gas stations make them an intriguing adaptive reuse prospect for those with the creative wherewithal. Some have even gone so far as to turn them to private residences. Various states or programs tie targeted funding to gas station reuse, and a full quarter of the EPA's federal brownfield allocation is intended for petroleum brownfield sites.

2. Redevelop

Scraped and remediated, parcels formerly home to fueling stations are experiencing radical changes in land use across the world. These redevelopments mark a significant opportunity to transition prime real estate towards a better and higher use.

In Vancouver, city officials and SoleFood have partnered to turn a former gas station lot into a 500 tree urban orchard that will produce fruits like apples, pears, and lemons. There's something particularly inspiring about turning a cog in the wheel of the carbon economy back into an urban greenspace.

3. Reposition

With recent growth in the use of electric and alternative fuel vehicles, as well as car sharing and burgeoning support for bike/ped options, some see gas stations of the future not as a radically different land uses but as multi-modal support stations that offer a little something for everyone. Imagine pulling up in your car or bike and being presented with a menu of fuels and services: gasoline, ethanol, propane, electric charge, biodiesel, tire pumps, bike tune-ups, and car sharing. Now imagine this place is also a stop along a transit line, bus rapid lane, rail line, or even streetcar system. It's not as crazy as you might think. In fact, Propel Fuels has already attracted both private and public funding to experiment with just this model in California.

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