Landover Regional Shopping Center:
The Perceptions and Realities that Caused a Mall to Fall

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Abstract

Built in 1972, the Landover Regional Shopping Center, located Southeast of Washington, D.C. in Prince George’s County, Maryland, was once the archetypal suburban shopping mall for the Washington, D.C. area. With four anchor stores, 1.3 million square feet, and a convenient location directly off the newly completed Capital Beltway, Landover mall was a retail force to be reckoned with. Filled with modern day amenities and high-end retailers, Landover mall was venerated by shoppers and envied by neighboring malls. By the mid-1980s, however, this image of Landover was replaced by a much darker one. Landover had lost much of its appeal as the structure was neglected and its high-end retailers moved out. By 2002, the mall had closed and was demolished a few years later. The transformation of Landover from a boom to a bust seemed to take place almost over night. But how was this possible? And why did it happen?

The answer lies in another transformation that was taking place in the mall’s surrounding area: the composition of the county’s population from majority white to majority black. The coinciding of the changing population and the deterioration of Landover mall is no coincidence. This was due to strong, negative perceptions of African Americans and, in turn, the areas in which they live. This perception is one of crime and poverty and is a perception that can affect the economic viability of the area such as the stability of Landover mall. Landover mall fell victim to the unfair and unwarranted perception projected onto it by the surrounding population, despite the reality that the area was otherwise viable and desirable for retailers. Although other factors are at work in generating the mall’s premature decline, namely benefits from tax laws, perception was the major contributor and, more importantly, a factor that should not have contributed to Landover’s failure.
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Dedication

For my parents and sister.
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**Introduction**

**Landover in the Context of the American Suburban Shopping Mall**

Landover Regional Shopping Center, more commonly known as Landover Mall or simply Landover, is located southeast of Washington, D.C. in Prince George’s County, Maryland. Originally a bustling shopping destination for residents all over the greater Washington, D.C. area, the mall is now a pile of rubble with nothing marking the existence of this once-great shopping center. Landover Mall was unable to adapt, reinvent itself and stay competitive, in turn, causing the mall’s failure. In addition, other forces were working against the success of the mall that motivated those charged with the mall’s success to prohibit the mall from making the crucial changes needed for it to succeed. These forces were the powers of negative perception and prejudice in response to the area’s growing African American population. Landover mall, therefore, is not so much an example of a mall that failed because it could not adapt, but one that failed because of a conscious decision by the developer, owner, and manager, Lerner Enterprises, not to allow change at the mall because it was already perceived as unable to succeed. To understand the difference between the voluntary and involuntary failure of this mall, the importance of the ability to adjust in the success of a shopping mall must first be understood in the larger context of the history of shopping malls.

Most industries to stay competitive must adapt, reinvent themselves, and innovate as the environment around them changes. The result of this in the retailing industry is the movement away from the downtown Main Street and towards suburban shopping centers. This transformation of where and how people shop is a response by retailers to the changing American lifestyle. Urbanization, suburbanization, and technological
advancements are factors that the developers of twentieth century shopping malls had to recognize and adapt to in order to capitalize on the markets within this constantly changing environment. With American shopping malls accounting for 29% of the world’s total retail space, competitive with entire continents such as Asia which houses 37% of the world’s total retail area and Europe which holds 10%, the ability of developers to capitalize on changing markets has turned into the dominance over them. However, as the American landscape continues to change, as it has before and will continue to, American shopping malls must react and project accordingly to remain viable industries.

The change in how people shop from the downtown department store to the shopping mall has a direct correlation to the urbanization before World War I and subsequent suburbanization occurring after World War II. Between the Napoleonic Wars and World War I, 35 million immigrants entered the United States from Europe alone. In addition to the millions of American citizens who immigrated from rural areas and immigrants from other non-European nations, cities were booming and retail was changing to take advantage of it all. The classic two-part commercial block, with retail on the ground floor and clearly separated residences above, was making way for the two and three-part vertical block. These buildings also have retail on the ground floor, but only business spaces above. They are taller to accommodate increased density and the rising cost of downtown land values.

2 Nelli, Humbert S. “European Immigrants and Urban America” in *The Urban Experience*, Eds. Raymond A. Mohl and James F. Richardson. Pg. 61.
These buildings began to change as America experienced economic prosperity in the 1920’s to both attract and accommodate more customers. The downtown streets of cities were busy with pedestrians, and big windows with flashy displays were the way to grab their attention. Carrara glass used together with Vitrolite, pigment structural glass, to cover both exterior and interior wall surfaces was incorporated into retail structures to open up the storefront in an attempt to grab the eye of a passerby.4

New materials and building designs were the methods retailers used to maintain competition with each other. This competition turned the commercial center into “a collage, a panoply of competing images embodying the rivalry of the marketplace” thanks to “facades serving as advertisements for the businesses within” and “buildings conceived as monuments to the industriousness of the people who commissioned them.”5 This style of department store continued to thrive without major changes up until the 1930s and 1940s. These buildings, along with those before them made huge adjustments, adaptations, and complete transformations to keep up with an increasingly bustling and modernizing public. They also attempted to attract and keep people downtown in a tireless battle of staying ahead of the competition.

The world of retail began its more drastic transformation after World War II, when “America’s birth rate rose, and millions of young families with children abandoned the crowded central cities and invested in suburban homes with yards large enough to accommodate a sandbox and a swing set.”6 Until this point, suburbs had been mostly

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4 Longstreth, Richard. Pg. 132.
communities available to only those who could afford to move and travel in and out of
the city, but this also was changing. Before World War II,

Only 43 percent of travel in Baltimore was by car, and in
Philadelphia private motor vehicles accounted for only 31 percent
of all trips. But in every city reliance on the automobile was
increasing, and public transit patronage was declining. Freed from
the slow-moving, centripetal transit lines and devoted to the greater
flexibility of the automobile, Americans now migrated farther from
the urban core and often chose their residence without regard to bus
routes or streetcar lines.7

This growing dependence on the private automobile and the ensuing pattern of
moving away from urban areas was eased and encouraged with the passage of the
Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which authorized the construction of 41,000 miles of
interstate highways and subsidized 90 percent by the Federal government.8 This
government supported pattern of outward growth, for retail, translated into the
simultaneous slowing of one market in cities and the flourishing of another in the
suburbs. Because “the ideal shopping center location optimizes access to maximum
market potential for the tenant merchants, or, conversely, access to merchandise for the
shopping public,”9 the face of retail would change again.

“As more and more Americans responded to the advantages of suburban life,
retailers joined the outward migration in hot pursuit of the suburban dollar. But retailing
had to adapt to the suburbanite’s devotion to the automobile, and the shopping center was
born.”10 There had been shopping centers dedicated to the motorist before the 1950s,
such as the Kansas City’s Country Club Plaza built in the 1920s, but, as the name

7 Teaford, Jon C., Pg. 99.
8 Teaford, Jon C., Pg. 99.
10 Teaford, Jon C., Pg. 105.
suggests, they were not targeting middle-class families in America’s new suburbs. The year 1956 marks the birth of the first modern shopping center: Victor Gruen’s Southdale Shopping Center located in Minneapolis, Minnesota.\textsuperscript{11} Southdale was one of 1,600 shopping centers built in 1956 in addition to the 2,500 more being planned or in construction phases.\textsuperscript{12} With each new road, new suburbanite, and new shopping mall, more of each would follow.

The shopping mall phenomena first hit the Washington, D.C. area in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1968, Washington, D.C. suburbs opened their first suburban mall, Montgomery Mall, in Montgomery County, Maryland. Montgomery Mall was soon followed in 1969 with the construction of Tyson’s Corner in Fairfax County, Virginia, then Landover Mall in 1972 located in Prince George’s County, Maryland. Mall construction boomed throughout the 1970’s with Springfield Mall, Lake Forest Mall, Fair Oaks Mall, and White Flint Mall all opening by 1977 in metropolitan Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{13} These malls arose out of the same population growth patterns and economic forces seen throughout the country created by mass suburbanization and technological advancements in shopping mall design.

Suburban shopping centers have been the product of as well as the catalyst for America’s suburbs. However, there is a recent and growing trend in which a younger generation is looking to return to the urban core. Predictably, the world of retail will respond and influence accordingly, as it has done for over one hundred years and will continue to do. Retail and economic specialists have been aware of this trend for over a

\textsuperscript{11} Chung, Chuihua Judy and See Tsung Leong, Pg. 116.
\textsuperscript{12}Teaford, Jon C., Pg. 105.
decade now, as a 1990 article revealed that the average time shoppers spent in malls dropped by half from 1980 to 1990.\(^{14}\) Old retail pro, Stanley Marcus, Chief Executive Officer of big-box retailer Wal-Mart, David Glass, along with old retail, along with other retail experts are predict that 50 to 75 percent of present retail will be extinct within a decade.\(^{15}\) “Regional malls clearly have a life cycle, and a lot of them are in their last throes. By 2010, 55% of the nation’s shopping [is predicted to] be conducted in nonstore venues—online services, direct mail, catalogues, 800 numbers, and the like.”\(^{16}\) It appears as though the mall may be disappearing as American’s preferences towards shopping styles change, unless mall can appeal to those changing preferences and keep customers coming to them, like many suburban Washington, D.C. shopping malls have been able to do.

Shopping centers in the greater Washington, D.C. metropolitan area have not followed the perceived national trend of mall decline and eventual disappearance. In fact, more malls have been built in Washington, D.C. as well as in its surrounding suburbs during the 1980s when mall fervor was diminishing in other areas of the country. Additionally, current malls are, for the most part, thriving in the region. Lakeforest Mall, Forest Village Park Mall, Laurel Center Mall, White Flint Mall, Ballston Common, Potomac Mills, and Tyson’s II are all examples of malls built during the 1980’s throughout the greater Washington, D.C. area; all are, to varying degrees, continuing successful retail ventures despite projections that suburban shopping malls would have a

severely less prominent place in retail. In addition to these newer malls being built, older malls continue to thrive such as Tyson’s Corner and Montgomery Mall. However, the success of both these older malls and the newer malls is likely due, in part, to their ability to adapt to “meet the competitive challenges they face and evolve into more sustainable community assets.”

The ability to adapt as seen throughout the development of the suburban shopping mall is the ability to survive. As noted, the conditions that led to the creation of shopping malls and have continued to sustain them are beginning to or have changed. Markets, demographics, competition, traffic patterns, and crime are all factors that malls respond to in order to keep and attract more customers; the failure to adapt is the failure of the mall.

For Landover Mall, the changing racial composition of its customer base from white to black posed its greatest obstacle in maintaining a successful mall. Although there is also a strong tax benefit factor adding to Landover’s ability to succeed, which will be thoroughly discussed later, Landover Mall’s failure can be mostly attributed to two, inter-related reasons: First is the perception of this changed population enhancing the already growing negative image of Landover Mall, discouraging both local and regional consumers from shopping there. Second is Landover Mall’s inability and unwillingness to confront and actively transform its negative image, only further exacerbating the negative perception and causing further decline.

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Chapter I

History and Benefits:
Developing Landover Regional Shopping Center in Prince George’s County

The 1960s marked the beginning of a transformation in Prince George’s County, Maryland. This transformation included dramatic changes in population size, ethnic makeup, and household income. Between 1960 and 1970, Prince George’s County underwent several major changes in its population. The first was a nearly doubling of the population from 355,000 in 1960 to 600,000 in 1970. Due to an out-migration of over 6,000 whites, the proportion of black residents located in the greater Landover area increased from approximately 30 percent of the population in 1960 to nearly 70 percent by 1970. In addition to the increased black population, black median family income was on the rise, becoming slightly higher compared to their white counterparts at $12,450 (about $37,200 in today’s dollar value) in 1970. Prince George’s County was growing more populated, was more minority dominated, and was wealthier every year.

The increases in population and purchasing power created both the residents’ need for more commercial space and the developers’ desire for new and broader markets to invest in. The Landover Mall Regional Shopping Center (Landover Mall) was the resulting product of these new needs and desires. The mall was not devised as solely a place for local residents to spend their growing incomes, but as a contributing factor in attracting other high intensity commercial uses, such as a “regionally serving office

21 M-NCPPC, “Development Potential Model Neighborhood Area Prince George’s County Planning Area 72.” Pg. 17.
complex and successful high-rise apartment development." The developer of Landover Mall itself, Lerner Enterprises, brought this speculated development to life as the company later built a Marriott Hotel as well as 3,000 apartments units in the county. The county had a new composition of residents that held a new and untapped potential for economic prosperity.

The development of Landover Mall hinged on its viability in the Landover area as a destination for residents from all over the greater Washington, D.C. area to shop. This is because developers must illustrate that the area for proposed project has sufficient numbers of tenants and customers to support it in order to receive credit to finance its creation. To discern the sustainability of their project, developers rely on demographic information and examine the accessibility of the area in selecting project sites. Thus, confidence in the area of an economic venture is key in investing in that venture, particularly malls where physical location and the location’s qualities usually determine their success. Therefore, the selection of Landover, Maryland as the site for a regional mall speaks directly to the quality and viability of the area.

The developer of Landover mall, Lerner Enterprises along with the presidents of the four would-be anchor stores of the mall (Hecht’s, Sears, Garfinckel’s and Woodward & Lothrop,) expressed their confidence in the viability of the Landover area by initiating negotiations with the Prince George’s County Council about developing Landover Mall,

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22 M-NCPPC, “Prince George’s County Trendlines,” Pg. 17.
estimated to cost in excess of $60,000,000. This confidence is further supported by the businesses practices of Lerner’s President, Theodore N. Lerner, who stressed the dependence of his own instinct in determining what projects to pursue.

Both Lerner Enterprises and Prince George’s County had persuasive reasons for building in the town of Landover as both parties stood to benefit from development of a regional shopping center. The County Council projected that Lerner’s proposed mall would result in:

- Approximately 100 local merchants to open private business, result in the creation of approximately 3,000 jobs, will provide an additional $500,000 per annum in property taxes, will yield approximately $3,250,000 per annum in sales taxes, will create a new source of State and County income tax and revenues and will help to create substantial work and employment for County-based contractors and their employees.

Lerner’s development of the Washington, D.C. area’s largest mall, Tyson’s Corner, four years earlier established him as a successful mall developer. Lerner’s past mall success, in addition to the benefits the county stood to receive with the building of a regional mall, made the Landover Mall project appear to be a sound business venture.

On Lerner’s side of the business deal, the past decade of population and economic growth in Prince George’s County and its projected future growth in addition to the area’s accessibility, served as adequate evidence for the developer to pursue Landover as the project site. Other benefits to Lerner provided by the county such as tax credits or the providing of land for the project were not mentioned in the County Council’s approval process of the project. In addition, the county was promised that the proposed mall

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would “remain open for business for a period of not less than thirty years.” Ultimately, Landover Mall began as the product of different interests finding a common project to fulfill their separate symbiotic goals. All parties involved with the building of Landover Mall stood to benefit from its construction, but did some parties stand to benefit more than others? And would those benefits come at a cost to others?

**Mall Financing, Accelerated Depreciation Values, and Landover’s Decline**

The change in depreciation values changed the motivation driving the construction of shopping malls and raised the above questions as well as the question of whether the benefits of Landover Mall were the reason it was allowed to decline? Since the first appearance of the generic shopping mall in the 1920s, developers have searched for ways to make these ventures increasingly profitable. Methods initially included creating shopping centers that attracted the most customers, increasing sales and, in turn, increasing the rents of shops within the centers. However, due to a 1954 change in the tax laws the strategies to make malls cost-effective shifted from the profitability of sales and rents to the profitability of the depreciation of the structure itself.

Depreciation enables property and building owners to deduct a fraction of the profits from that property to be used to replace or repair structures and machines inherently necessary to the success of the business. This deduction is not taxable because it is expected to be reinvested back into the property. Federal officials acknowledged the need for business owners to account for depreciation and the original income tax legislation of 1913 permitted businesses to deduct from their taxable profits a “reasonable allowance for the exhaustion, wear and tear of property arising out of its use or

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employment in the business.”

“Reasonable allowance” refers to a fair and rational time period for which a building or machine integral to the practices and success of the business is considered useful. The change in the definition of “reasonable allowance” is, specifically, what has created the shift in the reasons that determine which shopping malls are lucrative investments.

From 1934 until 1954 the estimated useful life of a building was forty years as defined by the Treasury Department. Owners could deduct from profits 1/40 of the original cost of the building. Therefore, a new forty-million-dollar mall, had an annual depreciation deduction of a million dollars that went back into the pockets of the developer to be held for building replacement. But there was no requirement in the tax law to force investors to use the deducted money for that purpose. In essence, investors could use the money for anything they wished including investing in other similar building ventures. The passage of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 made the benefits of this tax law greater and increased the attractiveness of investing in shopping malls.

With the country experiencing a minor recession in 1953, the 1954 tax law included several tax breaks designed to stimulate economic development and investment, namely the acceleration of the depreciation deduction. Accelerated depreciation replaced the straight-line approach created in the 1930s to a 200% declining balance and a “sum-of-the-years’-digits” depreciation. These two new formulas used to calculate

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32 Hanchett, Thomas W. Pg. 1094.
depreciation shifted tax deductions toward the first years of a project’s life, enabling investors to reap the benefits early on. Investors began building structures for which profits were greater from accelerated depreciation than they were for the use of the building; thus developers found it more profitable to take advantage of the tax-free income while it was the highest in its first few years of operation, then selling the building at a higher price than the initial investment. This pattern of investment became quickly and exceedingly popular among large-scale retail real estate development. In addition, with the accelerated depreciation value only applicable to new, not renovated buildings, the emphasis on new construction was concentrated in the suburbs. Building on untouched and unpopulated land instead of in dense urban areas was cheaper for the developer and resulted in a change from “consequent” to “catalytic” development. Ultimately, the 1954 tax laws changed the types of incentives considered in developing buildings and made constructing large, suburban shopping malls easy, quick, and profitable business investments.

This type of investment, done for the purpose of benefiting from tax laws, created distinct new business practices. In addition to the general construction of suburban shopping malls, “quick turnover was the hallmark of the new depreciation game” as investors found such ventures most profitable when sold in five to seven years. The money made from those transactions would often fund the construction of a bigger building. New projects became larger because such structures were more expensive to build, requiring more materials, laborers, and time. The motivation in building malls

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33 Hanchett, Thomas W. Pg. 1095.  
34 Hanchett, Thomas W. Pg. 1098.  
35 Hanchett, Thomas W. Pg. 1098.  
36 Hanchett, Thomas W. Pg. 1100.
bigger than ever before arose from the fact that the more costly the structure, the higher the depreciation allowance.\textsuperscript{37} This general pattern of suburban mall development for the primary purpose of untaxed income is important in considering the intentions of Lerner Enterprises’ construction of Landover Mall and the mall’s subsequent deterioration. Was Landover Mall’s decline solely based upon Lerner’s ability to profit from the mall regardless of its success? If so, was this the reason for Landover’s long history of neglect and deterioration?

The intentions of Lerner Enterprises in building Landover Mall, if done primarily for the tax benefits, would not be disclosed by the company because of its ownership of many other malls in the greater Washington, D.C. area. For Lerner to admit that its purpose in building shopping malls was to take advantage of a large tax loophole would create a negative image of the company and, in turn, could cause general backlash on current malls and future investment plans. However, by comparing the business practices of Lerner with the practices of developers who build malls for the sake of accelerated depreciation the above question may be answered.

Lerner Enterprises agreed before the mall’s construction to keep Landover open for a period of thirty years. Lerner not only fulfilled that promise, but also maintained ownership of the property throughout that entire time, which was uncharacteristic of the quickly-build, quickly-sell practices of developers looking to maximize profits through accelerated depreciation. In addition, Landover was built in response to the area’s growing populations and buying power within a defined suburban and increasingly urbanizing area, not in the outer-most cheapest rural areas characteristic of catalytic development. These two aspects of the pre-construction decisions of Landover Mall

\textsuperscript{37} Gladwell, Malcolm.
suggest that accelerated depreciation was not the sole incentive behind its being built. However, this does not mean that accelerated depreciation or even depreciation in general was not a factor in Lerner’s decision to allow Landover to decline.

There are aspects of Landover’s development that both physically and fiscally support the premise that the mall was created out of self-interested, depreciation-driven practices. One of these factors includes the mall’s sheer size. Landover mall was a 1.3 million square foot structure, costing about 600 million dollars to build and offering a significant depreciation value. Even with straight-line depreciating, Landover may have been profitable by its sheer existence. In addition to the impressive square footage, Landover’s decline was timed with a tax cut, further encouraging investment in new structures and neglect of existent past projects.

Included in President Ronald Reagan’s 1981 tax cut was a significant change in depreciation values. Replaced by the Accelerated Cost Recovery System (ACRS), depreciation values of standard reasonable allowance decreased to fifteen years. Under this new tax system, developers could collect up to 31% of the buildings cost within the first three years of a project’s completion. Although ACRS was replaced in 1986 with the Modified Accelerated Cost Recovery System (MACRS) that returned the years of useful building life to 40 years, from 1980 through 1985 there was a strong renewed interest in developing new malls that coincided with the beginning of Landover’s decline. Not all of Lerner’s malls suffered decline as a result of this tax policy. In fact, Lerner reinvested in many of its other malls in the late 1980s to ensure their future success as profitable retail and entertainment centers, not just profitable structures to

38 Hanchett, Thomas W. Pg. 1106.
own. Because of this, it is possible that Landover suffered at the success of Lerner’s other investments, using its depreciation value to cover or subsidize the cost of revamping their other malls.

Lerner Enterprises benefited from its relationship with and management of Landover mall in terms of profit-producing tax benefits. However, there is evidence not only that other factors besides benefits created by tax laws could have contributed to Landover’s untimely deterioration and but also that both tax law and these other factors are not completely independent of each other. Although not as clear cut and tangible as the direct correlation of tax-free deduction to increased profit, these factors are equally important in both the decision not to reinvest in Landover and the rate of its decline. A study by Hunter Interests Inc. found that Landover’s image was an equal contributor to the mall’s failure and is surrounded by a community that could support the shopping center and some.40 This does not dispel the affects of fiscal policies on real estate development, but accounts for the reasons behind why Landover suffered its fate as opposed to other malls owned by Lerner Enterprises. It is possible that Lerner needed to sacrifice one of its malls to help the others succeed and selected Landover because of the image of the area. Whatever the intentions and reasoning of Lerner, Landover Mall was ultimately a victim to two, likely interrelated factors: economic factors and an image distorted by prejudice. These forces worked both independently and reinforced each other to bring down Landover Mall.

40 Curry, Wayne K. Donald E. Hunter, Marvin F. Wilson, and M.H. Jim Estepp, ““Proposals for Stadium Area Include Entertainment Center; Prince George’s Officials Seek Development,” The Washington Post, June 11, 1997, B03.
Chapter II

Up and then Down, Down, Down: The History of Landover Mall

In its earlier years, Landover Mall was a living monument to modernized and high-end shopping. Although outdated and unwelcoming today, its design was state of the art from top to bottom, inside and out when first constructed. In addition to the mall’s initial physical appeal, it also adhered to several principles that contributed to the success of shopping malls. These principles, as devised by the Urban Land Institute, address the causes of failure and success amongst retail spaces and include a mixture of stores and uses based upon type, quality, and locality in order to attract both local and regional markets.41

Although the exterior was generally bland, as U.S. malls of the 1970s usually were, but its sheer size, 1.3 million square feet of general merchandise and specialty shops all housed on an 88-acre site put customers in awe.42 The interior was equally impressive with the integration of fountains, trees and other greenery, and a strong emphasis on glass usage on the second level. The effects of these interior design techniques created an interesting yet soothing and clean environment conducive to shopping.43 In addition, the inside connoted a feeling of refinement and stylishness, created in part by the high-end stores luring shoppers within. The mall was built to accommodate the growing population and incomes of residents in the Landover vicinity.

The area’s population transformation of the 1960s continued through the 1970s and intensified in many respects. Although the total population experienced minimal

growth over the 1970s from 660,567 in 1970 to 665,071 in 1980, the racial composition continued to change drastically. By 1980, Prince George’s County’s white population had been almost halved from 561,476 in 1970 to 391,427 in 1980; whereas the black population had more than doubled from 91,808 in 1970 to 247,860 in 1980.\textsuperscript{44} Median family income also experienced dramatic change throughout the 1970’s, increasing from $12,450 in 1970 to $25,450 in 1980.\textsuperscript{45}

Between 1972-1982, Landover Mall was consistently the second or top source of retail sales in the county with a 188.6\% increase in sales during this time period.\textsuperscript{46} These profits are due to Landover’s many stores and many functions. Landover was the only mall in the entire Washington, D.C. area with four high-end, local and national anchor department stores: Hecht’s, Sears, Woodward and Lothrop (Woodie’s), and Garfinckel’s; and it also housed the NTI Landover 6 Theatres, an MVA Express Office, and at least two sit-down restaurants. Landover Mall was not just full with a constant high occupancy rate into the early 1980s, it was full of a variety of products to consume and entertain. However, as the mall entered the mid-to-late 1980s, it entered into the beginning stages of its long decline.

The economic and racial makeup of the county continued its pattern of increased African Americans and wealth throughout the 1980s to 1990. The pattern, however, was less intense then the drastic overhaul of the county’s demographics of the 1960s and 1970s. Between 1980 and 1990 the total population grew from 665,071 to 729,268, a far

\textsuperscript{44} M-NCPPC, “Prince George’s County Trendlines,” April 1995. Pg. 3.
\textsuperscript{45} M-NCPPC, “Prince George’s County Trendlines,” April 1995. Pg. 17.
\textsuperscript{46} The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, “Retail Trade in Prince George’s Count: Sales Trends, Current, Directions, Supportable Space,” June 1985, Pg. 25.
less drastic increase compared to the near doubling of the population during the 1960s. 47

During the 1980s, the white population continued to decline, but only by a few tens of thousands from 391,427 to 314,616 in 1990. 48 The black population, on the other hand, continued its rapid growth, although less intensely than that of the 1970s, increasing by over 100,000 people over the 1980s to 369,791 by 1990. 49 For the first time in Prince George’s County history, African Americans comprised the majority of people residing within the county.

Per capita and median family income continued to increase throughout the 1980s as well. Per capita income increased by $10,006 to $20,326 between 1980 and 1990 (an increase of over $4,000 in 1992 dollars, an increase of almost 25%). 50 Per capita income in Prince George’s County was comparable to the greater Washington, D.C. area, although it was slightly less and the discrepancy did grow slightly during the late 1980s. 51 Median family income jumped from $25,525 in 1980 to $48,471 in 1990. 52 In addition, retail sales steadily increased countywide throughout the 1980s from $2.666 billion in 1983 to $4.287 billion in 1990. 53 Paradoxically, Landover began its slow, intensifying decline during these years of economic prosperity and high retail sales.

The decline of Landover Mall begins with the increase of crime in Prince George’s County beginning in 1985 and peaking during the early 1990s. 54 Crime is a very important aspect for area retailers as “nearly 70% of shoppers are affected by

49 M-NCPPC, “Prince George’s County Trendlines,” April 1995. Pg. 3.
security concerns and choose their destinations accordingly.” Security concerns do not just refer to problems within the mall, but extend to the area’s larger crime problems as part of the mall’s image. Although crime in Prince George’s County generally followed the same pattern of ups and downs experienced by the greater Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, the increases in crime particularly tarnished the image of Landover Mall. The reputation of the mall’s surrounding area, described by police as one of the county’s “worst areas for open drug trafficking and related shootings,” had become the reputation of the mall itself as crimes reported by The Washington Post in the Landover area often referenced Landover mall as a familiar landmark and point of reference. This is illustrated by one incident of a “drug-related shooting Friday of five persons occurred in an apartment complex across the street from the shopping center.”

Crime was also spilling over into the mall itself which, combined with the area’s crime, enhanced the negative image of the mall. The reputation of the mall itself as a crime-ridden space most likely began with a well-publicized incident in 1984 where three youths allegedly were beaten by mall security. Other Landover Mall related crimes further promoting the mall’s crime-infested image, include the beating and robbing of a woman leaving the mall from a day of shopping. These stories, read by thousands throughout Washington D.C. and its suburbs, helped to create and proliferate an image of the mall that, deserved or not, would pose serious obstacles for the mall’s ability to stay in business.

57 Pressley, Sue Anne, “Area Violence Doesn’t Help Mall’s Image.”
The crime and resulting deteriorating image of the mall would prove detrimental as it scared off shoppers and retailers alike. In 1989 Landover Mall had only one vacant shop space; but by 1994 that number increased to 28. Not only had more stores left the mall, typically higher-end stores that draw wealthier and higher numbers of customers, were leaving and being replaced by less prestigious stores or nothing at all. Garfinckel’s, occupying 89,000 square feet of the mall and a major draw for customers seeking fine men and women’s clothing, closed in 1989 and was left unoccupied after. Woodward & Lothrop left Landover mall in 1993 to be replaced by the more generic J.C. Penney, which in turn vacated a few years later in 2000.

Overall, crime played a large role in the decline of Landover Mall in creating the mall’s poor image that, ultimately, caused and reinforced very real and very negative effects. The 1990s left Landover mall a shadow of the great retail triumph it had been in its early years: the movie theatre was closed, the MVA Express was gone, the high-end clothiers had left and either been replaced by discount stores or remained empty, the fountains had been turned off, and the greenery allowed to die. By the close of the 1990s, the image of Landover Mall as a low-quality, high-crime shopping space was its reality. In 2002, the doors of Landover Mall closed forever, against pleas to keep the mall open made by local residents and politicians, and demolition began two years later. By summer’s end in 2006, Landover mall was nothing more than a pile of rubble slowly being cleaned up, so that not one physical remnant of the mall would remain.

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60 Nakamura, David, “Mall’s Comedown Taints Lerner Image; Resentment of Nats’ New Owner Lingers in Pr. George’s,” The Washington Post, May 16, 2006, Metro, B01.
Chapter III

The Black Middle-Class: Perceptions and Realities

There is a strong correlation between the rising African American population of Prince George’s County and the decline of Landover Mall. This coincidence, substantiated by the state of the mall during the 1980s compared to the demographic changes in the county of that time, seems illogical as increased income levels were also characteristic of this time period. In addition to the disconnect between increased county prosperity and Landover’s decreased success, the rising black middleclass of the 1970s had proven itself a valuable market to retailers. In the 1970s, middle-class blacks spent larger percentages on the types of retail goods and at the types of stores found at Landover Mall.

Compared to their white counterparts, middle-class blacks, characteristic of the growing African American population in Prince George’s County during the 1970s, spent larger percentages of their household income on most of the same categories of goods. These categories include household items, school supplies, personal care products, and clothing.63 The middle-class is identified by, among other things, the quantity and quality of goods it consumes. Prestige and image are intertwined with consumption and were particularly important to middle-class African Americans so as to identify themselves as such. This emphasis on image explains the percent of income spending differences between whites and black on items that illustrate their social standing such as clothes,64 and these were the items most likely to be purchased at expensive stores.

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64 Landry, Bart, The New Black Middle Class, Pgs. 158, 163.
The black middle-class concern with prestige in its purchases strongly influenced preference for location of shopping. Larger percentages of middle-class blacks compared to their white counterparts, shopped more frequently at expensive clothing stores such as Landover’s Woodward & Lothrop, Raleigh’s, Woolworth, or Garfinckel’s. Slightly more than 25% of both blacks and whites of the middle-class shopped at either expensive or good clothing stores prevalent at Landover mall, and more whites than blacks from this income bracket shopped more often at discount stores such as Kmart, stores not typically found at Landover Mall until much later.

Consumption is a large part of the black middle-class culture. The consuming of specific goods from specific places helps this population to create prestige and define status. It also makes them a great potential source of spent retail money and, in turn, an attractive market for retailers to target. This characteristic of the 1970s black middle-class further emphasizes the incongruence between the rise of the black middle-class in Prince George’s County coinciding with the deterioration of Landover Mall. In theory, the mall should have thrived as more and more middle-class blacks entered the county during the 1980s, but this was not the case.

Money cannot buy everything. Image and status, although the goal of middle-class African Americans, could not be purchased to the extent that perception would change. Unfortunately, America’s lengthy history of racism, classicism, and inaccurate stereotypes has long been a severe obstacle for the social mobility of African Americans and has reinforced an unjustified negative perception of them. This perception not only holds consequences for African Americans pursuing the American Dream, it extends to

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65 Landry, Bart, The New Black Middle Class, Pg. 163.
66 Landry, Bart, The New Black Middle Class, Pgs. 162, 163.
the image of the larger area where these populations reside and the general emotions evoked by that image. For the Landover Mall area and the mall specifically, this image became one of ridden with crime and of low levels of affluence and buying power. Together, these perceptions of the mall and its surrounding neighborhood account for the disconnect between the steadily increasing incomes and population within the mall’s surrounding area and the steadily declining quality and viability of Landover Mall.

Neighborhood racial composition directly influences fear of crime.67 This fear is heightened by rapid changes in racial makeup of an area, such as Prince George’s County. Fear of crime, however, is not coupled with nor caused by increased deterioration of the physical neighborhood or increased numbers of unsupervised teenaged groups.68 It is caused simply by the movement of African Americans, of no specified class, into an area at rates faster than considered historically normal. The roots of this fear are not fully known, but are assumed to have originated from historically racist practices that did promote high levels of crime in largely black neighborhoods. This unsubstantiated fear may also be rooted in the stereotype of blacks as aggressive or violent by nature.69 Whatever the origins of the fear of crime as associated with African Americans may be, the fear itself is largely unfounded, yet prevalent amongst both white and black populations. In addition, this unjustly perceived fear poses real threats to the viability of African American communities and their immediate surrounding area as seen in the detrimental affects on Landover Mall.

In addition to the undeserved perception of fear of crime, African Americans are also perceived as impoverished. The association with blacks and poverty is rooted in the link between growing urban problems caused by insufficient funds to correct these problems and the overwhelmingly black populations that occupy these urban spaces. Although it is true that on average African Americans have lower incomes than whites, it is far from a universally proven principle that all whites are wealthier than all blacks or that all blacks are poor. The high-income levels of Prince George’s County’s black residents prove that. Perception can be stronger than reality, however, and can hold strong consequences for black communities and the businesses within them such as the success of Landover Mall in Prince George’s County.

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70 Peffley, Mark and Jon Hurwitz, Pg. 59.
Chapter IV

The Role of Perception in Landover’s Decline

Beginning in the mid 1980s, Landover Mall began to suffer from two, reinforcing factors: crime was growing increasingly pervasive and the mall’s physical appearance was becoming dated. This cycle prescribes to the Broken Windows theory in which disorder and crime are inextricably linked.\(^{71}\) In the case of Landover, if the mall continues to appear to be uncared for, crime will follow. In turn, increased crime will result in poorer upkeep and fewer improvements. Also acting upon this cycle, and exaggerating the crime factor, was the negative perception of African Americans that reside in the Landover area and increasingly make up the majority of its residents.

As mentioned before, a safe shopping space is crucial to customers in deciding where to shop. Between 1984 and 1989 Prince George’s County experienced an increase in both property and violent crime.\(^{72}\) This trend was representative, however, of the increasing property and violent crime occurring throughout Maryland and affected malls statewide. No mall paid so dearly for these increases as Landover. Other factors could be contributing to the hard hit Landover took during the mid-and late 1980s such as the building of other malls in the neighboring counties, but a more likely cause, accounting for the inflated effect of crime on Landover, is the negative perception of African Americans.

Bill Connell, a jewelry store employee transferred to Landover Mall from Annapolis in 1984, recalls, “I was nervous about it. My first couple of days here I was waiting for someone to break in with a gun or shoot me or something.” The reality was

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that Connell had only experienced one nonviolent shoplifting incident.\textsuperscript{73} Connell’s account of his expected experience and actual experience captures the larger sentiment that “the county’s quality of life is going down as the black population is going up.”\textsuperscript{74} People perceive Prince George’s County and, subsequently Landover Mall, as a dangerous place to be, a place no one wants to shop. Yet the reality, also captured by Connell, is that the mall is not crime-ridden and the fear of the mall is unwarranted.

In contrast, when the area around mall was mostly white, incidents of crime were also reported regularly in The Washington Post, but the impact of those reports did not hold such negative effects on the mall. In 1977, when white accounted for about 80% of Prince George’s County’s population, The Washington Post reported, “although it isn’t obvious; a cops and robbers games is played out daily between security guards and those shoppers who choose to steal rather than buy” and that “the bustling crowds of shoppers at Landover Mall Shopping Center in Prince George’s County probably never hear the excited voices of the private security guards speaking into their walkie-talkies.”\textsuperscript{75} Crime is taking place and regularly inside the mall, yet shoppers did not seem to mind in the 1970s. At that moment, Landover was not suffering from crime, at least not in terms of negative perception and lost costumers. As the county’s demographics shifted, however, so did the emphasis on crime and the perception of the Landover area and the mall.

If the perception of crime did not stop customers from coming to Landover, the physical state of the mall would, eventually stop them from coming back. Throughout Landover’s thirty-year lifespan, its physical elements never experienced any remodeling

\textsuperscript{75} M-NCPPC, “Development Potential Model Neighborhood Area Prince George’s County Planning Area 72,” Pg. 15.
or revamping, only operational and non-operational periods. Landover failed to modernize as styles changed and its upkeep was allowed to wane, counterproductive to staying competitive and quashing the perception of ramped increased crime. The mall’s physical environment is the responsibility of owner and manager, Lerner Enterprises, which had heavily invested in its malls located in other jurisdictions, but had failed to reinvest in Landover Mall after it opened.\textsuperscript{76} This implies that Lerner was not unable to improve Landover, but unwilling to. Lerner, like the general public, bought into its own mall’s negative image and false perception, prematurely determining the mall would fail and, in turn, ensuring that it would.

Landover Mall was state of the art when first opened. It was the epitome of modern-day shopping in the goods and services it provided as well as in the luxurious and modern environment in which they were offered. Landover was the first mall in the Washington, D.C. area with four major department stores, each with distinctive merchandise and shopping styles, in addition to over 140 specialty shops.\textsuperscript{77} Although a standard big-box design, the mall housed many impressive architectural elements including three-foot geysers located in the central court that could shoot water to heights of twenty-feet, cubist sculptures framed by water and other landscaping, skylights to provide natural light, a coffered ceiling, and a glass balustrade on the second floor. The collective effect of these elements was an environment that attempted to make shoppers comfortable and stimulate their enthusiasm towards merchandising.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} Nakamura, David, “Mall’s Comedown Taints Lerner Image; Resentment of Nats’ New Owner Lingers in Pr. George’s,” \textit{The Washington Post}, May 16, 2006, Metro B01.
By the mid 1980s, Landover was not the sleek, ultra-modern mall it had been a
decade before. The mall suffered from simple maintenance problems ranging from litter
outside of the mall, to larger aesthetic problems such as leaving inoperable the prominent
fountain décor and leaving up signs of businesses that had vacated the mall. In addition
to the substandard upkeep of Landover that was common during the 1980s, Landover’s
standardized design with predictable architectural elements, layout, and stores was
increasingly unattractive to customers. In general, customers were seeking “authenticity
and a deeper sense of connection to their community, culture, climate and daily lives,”79
all of which Landover was offering less and less of.

Landover was not just dilapidated compared to its former self of the 1970s, but it
was becoming increasingly less competitive compared to other shopping malls. During
the 1980s the retail industry had been shaken by a “wave of takeovers, buyouts and
mergers” creating “more pressure for profits, less room for error and a greater risk of
failure.”80 This heightened sense of competition made it more important than ever for
Landover Mall to reinvent itself to attract and regain its customer base as older malls are
particularly vulnerable to large shifts in retailing.81 Owners of many of the Washington,
D.C. area’s shopping centers went on a remodeling binge focusing on adding new
services, facilities, and stores.82 The race to remodel spanned across the entire
Washington, D.C. as Tyson’s Corner in Fairfax, Virginia, underwent $150 million in

Institute, 2006. Pg. v.
H1.
81 Sun, Lena H.
82 Potts, Mark, “Mall Makeovers: D.C. Area Shopping Centers Go Upscale in a Big Way as They Vie for
renovations over two years; Prince George’s Plaza, near Landover Mall, was in the middle of a complete facelift in 1989; and Montgomery Mall, owned by Lerner Enterprises, constructed a Nordstrom and 40 smaller stores. In contrast to the rejuvenation efforts to other malls, Landover’s physical appearance was “dark and severe, with a polluted pond as a centerpiece, its picturesque wishing-well pennies lying among cigarette butts, plastic forks, and foam under an oily slick.” Landover’s old image could not compete with those of surrounding malls.

Theodore Lerner, President and CEO of Lerner Enterprises, claimed to have a personal interest in and personal responsibility for the state of his malls. He boasted his personal commitment in ensuring the aesthetic quality of his malls by anonymously inspecting his malls once a month with a tape recorder in-hand looking for “tenants whose walls are smeared with fingerprints or whose tile floors are improperly laid.” Lerner would send curt letters of admonition to tenants whose storefronts or general maintenance was not to Lerner’s standards. Lerner’s dedication to the state of his malls does not seem to match up with the obvious decline Landover began to suffer in the 1980s. Lerner’s commitment to high standards of his malls’ physical environment, then, must not apply to Landover. Is it possible that perception had tainted even the owner’s view of his mall?

Criticisms of Lerner include that he is “an almost ruthless type of guy who walks over dead bodies to get what he wants,” that “he tends to treat people like, ‘I come first,’”

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84 Potts, Mark.
he’s “unsympathetic to the retailer,” and “money comes before everything.” In addition, Lerner himself has claimed that he bases business decisions on instinct, a methodology open to personal bias and prejudice. In light of these criticisms and Lerner’s subjective business practices, it is reasonable that Lerner would have been affected by the negative image of Landover Mall as created by the larger perception of the area and, in turn, he may have deemed the mall a bad investment. This would explain Lerner’s actions in allowing the mall to stagnate until the contract with the county expired and the property could be redeveloped. Although Lerner is not responsible for pervasive crime in the area or the negative perception of African Americans, the company is responsible for allowing an undeserved negative image to destroy the mall by not taking any action to make basic improvements to keep shoppers, community residents, and mall tenants happy. Because the relationship between crime and disorder is cyclical and requires active resistance and change to interrupt its detrimental effects, Lerner’s mismanagement of Landover laid the groundwork for the mall’s continuing failings into the 1990s.

87 Boodman, Sandra G. and Thomas Gruibisich.
Chapter V

The Intensification of Failure and Closing of Landover Mall

The 1980s solidified Landover Mall as a blighted area overrun by violent criminals. Opportunities arose again and again for Lerner Enterprises to rejuvenate Landover Mall and capitalize on new, complimentary development and plummeting crime rates. Lerner continued to neglect the mall, however, reinforcing its 1980s image and the cycle of perception transforming reality. These opportunities, including drastically improved crime rates, the development of nearby Fed-Ex Field, and the continued growth in local family incomes, signaled the Landover area was a viable market. Regardless of the area’s continued and heightened viability, Landover Mall was continually overlooked for improvements and raised concerns and eyebrows throughout the Landover community as to why Lerner would pass up on a sound business investment. Towards the end of the 1990s, Prince George’s County officials and citizens increasingly believed that Landover’s decline was not only premature, but also preventable and that the mall’s failure was a direct result of the image of the county. Despite an improving environment for retail, the perception of Landover had been solidified and was in an irreversible cycle of decline. Lerner had sealed Landover’s fate.

In the mid-1990s, Prince George’s County experienced a sharp decrease in crime. The violent crime rate declined 19% and homicides decreased 42%, the lowest it had been in ten years.88 Yet, this decline meant little for Landover Mall whose name had already become synonymous with danger and crime. In addition to the mall’s informal name of “Landover,” automatically associating it with the area of Landover and its

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separate problems, the mall was too often an unfair target of reports on crime as it was used as a point of reference regularly in *The Washington Post*. Such references are exemplified here: “…Glenarden Apartments, a complex near Landover Mall that police describe as an open-air drug market”\(^89\) and, “a suburban Maryland banker was kidnapped at knifepoint on his way to work…Events began about 10 a.m. near the Landover Mall…”\(^90\) Crime is not happening at the mall, but is being associated with the mall and projected to thousands of shoppers across the greater Washington, D.C. area who, in turn, perceive the mall as a dangerous place where crimes are committed. This perception is something that even drastically falling crime rates could not change, as business was continuously bad for merchants and the mall’s physical state continued to decline.

The continued perception of crime goes hand-in-hand with Landover’s ever-growing perception of lacking good retail, a perception that became the mall’s reality, reinforcing the mall’s image as poor in addition to dangerous. By the 1990s, both Woodie’s and Garfinckel’s had gone out of business, leaving Landover without two of its anchor stores and finer men’s and women’s clothing stores. Although J.C. Penney replaced Woodie’s in the late 1990s, the national retailer left only a few years later due to dwindling sales. By 1998, the mall had over a 30% vacancy rate, the highest of any mall in the Washington, D.C. region.\(^91\) In addition to the high vacancy rate, remaining stores targeted low-income shoppers such as Payless Shoe Source, a dollar store, and numerous fast food chains.\(^92\) These stores did not appeal to the residents of Prince George’s county

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whose median family income averaged $61,900 by 1998 and preferred high-end retailers.  

This disconnect between wealthy residents and a poor mall did not go unnoticed, particularly with the building of Fed-Ex Field in 1997. The football stadium, located across the beltway from Landover Mall, is home to the area’s pro-football team, the Washington Redskins. During the construction of the stadium, studies were conducted by consulting firm Hunter Interests, Inc. to investigate the viability of the county investing money in the Landover area to spur economic development. The study revealed that the building of the Fed-ex Field would not guarantee a new customer base for Landover Mall, but rather solidified the viability of the current customer base and highlighted Landover mall’s inability and unwillingness to serve it. A Washington Post article captures the relationship of the 1980s reputation of the mall and its affects a decade later:

Even as the neighborhoods have improved and the county’s wealth has risen, the mall can’t seem to shake its old image. The vacant stores, dressed up with artwork and advertisements, are a reminder that perceptions continue to haunt the mall.  

By the end of the 1990s, Landover Mall was more neglected, blighted, and vacant than at any other time in its history.

Landover Mall’s neon blue and white sign, squatting on a grassy hill off Interstate 95, looks like a remnant from the ’70’s…The shopping center is clean, but the dark tiles inside are scuffed, the lighting is dim and the number of shoppers is small even on the weekends.

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93 Stoughton, Stephanie.
94 Stoughton, Stephanie.
95 Stoughton, Stephanie.
The mall was outdated, uninviting, and unsuccessful. The exterior echoed the interior, projecting an image of the area. The image, of rundown and unsafe, did not project the true characteristics of the area, but rather provided a negative perception caused by the area’s population. Lerner supported this perception by allowing low-end retailers to replace high-end retailers and refusing to renovate or remodel the mall. These two choices reinforced each other and proved, again and again, to work against the mall’s success. The story of J.C. Penney at Landover Mall illustrates this cycle.

Before leaving the mall all together, the J.C. Penney department store became an outlet because storeowners believed sales would rise by carrying discounted items, but the shift to an outlet did not produce an increase in sales. Nearby residents could afford higher-quality, higher-priced items and were willing to shop elsewhere to get them. In a few years, the outlet failed and the national retailer vacated the mall. J.C. Penney along with Lerner allowed perception, not fact, to educate them on their customer base and as a result J.C. Penney failed, left, and was never replaced. Lerner had denied the mall’s success by tolerating and enabling its decline. Landover had become a shadow of itself compared to its heyday of the early 1980s. The perceptions of the mall had become its reality as a dangerous, run-down shopping mall with no desirable retailers. Landover had become a dead mall.

In 2002, with Lerner’s 30-year contract with the county fulfilled, Landover Mall closed its doors. Likely influenced by the fact that Landover’s depreciation value had reached its full potential, the mall was no longer profitable by remaining open. After the malls closing, the mall was used for spill over parking from footballs games at Fed-Ex

\[96\] Stoughton, Stephanie.
Eventually the mall was only a liability and loss of money to Lerner as well as an eyesore to the residents of Landover, and the decision to tear down the mall was made.98

Demolition began in the summer of 2006 and was completed in late fall of the same year. Although no formal plans for redevelopment of the site have been made, the Urban Land Institute conducted a survey and panel report of the site and the surrounding area to investigate the possibility of redeveloping the vacant property where Landover Mall once stood. The panel found the site to be viable for many redevelopment purposes, namely residential building, noting its proximity to the District of Columbia, the large amount of existing infrastructure, and the growing population and household incomes.99

The panel acknowledged, however, a strong constraint to redeveloping the site. The site, although highly desirable in some respects, is located in an area in which “the marketplace perceives as having fewer services, fewer jobs, and less discretionary income.”100 This perception, whether deserved or not, is an obstacle that investments in the area must overcome in order to succeed. Unfortunately, the area’s reality and positive economic attributes are not enough to guarantee sustainability. The case of Landover Mall illustrates that perception is capable of destroying otherwise sound economic ventures.

98 Fult, Tony, Lerner Management Manager of Landover Mall in its last years before closing, Personal Interview, Oct. 16, 2006.
100 Urban Land Institute, Pg. 19.
Conclusion

Prince George’s County was increasingly wealthy, its residents consumed goods, its population was growing; and much of it was easily accessible to residents all over the greater Washington, D.C. area—all signs of an area capable of supporting a regional shopping mall. However, this was exactly what the county and more specifically the area of Landover, Maryland, could not do. There are some implications that Landover’s snowballed decline was the result of tax laws that made malls profitable solely by being in operation, regardless of their present state. These laws did contribute to Landover’s decline in that economics dictated business decisions, but other factors reinforced these business decisions and assisted in the mall’s premature deterioration and closing.

Other contributing factors included increased competition and crime. During the 1980s several malls were built attempting to capture the same greater Washington, D.C. shopping population as Landover Mall. This correlated with increases in crime throughout Prince George’s County and deterred shoppers from coming to Landover Mall. The overall effects of these factors on the mall, although independently not responsible for its decline, were exaggerated by the perception of the area and, in turn, brought about Landover’s end.

The decline of Landover Mall coinciding with the growing African American population within the county is more than a simple coincidence. Negative images and assumptions associated with African Americans were the main force behind Landover’s decline. Too often African Americans are perceived, although unfairly and undeservedly, as poorer than their white counterparts, and their communities are perceived as more prone to crime and disorder. This perception of the area was, in turn, projected onto
Landover Mall the result of which deterred owner and manager, Lerner Enterprises, from investing more consideration for and money in Landover. Lerner’s actions, or more appropriately inaction, crippled the mall’s ability to remain competitive. Landover received no renovations and did not actively retain or seek high-end retailers, causing only more decline and reinforcing the projected image of the area. Landover entered into a cycle of this perception, inaction, and decline until its closing and eventual demolition. Although it is not certain that had Lerner continued to invest in Landover and treat the mall as a viable shopping mall the mall would be a booming retail center today. However, what is clear is that by not investing in Landover at all, Lerner ensured the mall’s failure. Overall, Lerner cannot be blamed for crime rates or the perception of African Americans, but the company is responsible for the management of its retail properties and for making business decisions based upon factual information such as family incomes and consumer preferences, not unfounded prejudicial perceptions. Perhaps the most detrimental result of Landover Mall’s fate was not its actual closing, but that its closing continues to reinforce the idea that investing in African American communities is fruitless and, in turn, further perpetuates the perception of these types of communities because the mall did fail in such a community although not because of it. The failure of Landover Mall holds other implications for African American communities.

If perception can have such detrimental effects on a shopping mall, what other effects might perception produce? Could it threaten the entire economic viability of Prince George’s County? Could it threaten the viability of other services, such as the providing of public facilities and services or even quality education? The implications of
the power of perception are widespread and frightening to consider, but they are crucial to investigate and understand if African American communities are to succeed, especially with black suburbs emerging and expanding rapidly throughout America’s metropolitan regions.101

In addition to understanding the breadth of influence perception can have, understanding how to change this perception is equally valuable in finding solutions for the problems that perception can cause. But how can the perception of a population be changed? Projects like Landover Mall or other equally significant economic ventures may begin changing these perceptions by proving that African American communities are viable places for such investments. However, such projects must first question the truth of the perception itself and take risks and invest regardless of the image they would otherwise avoid. In addition, the project must actively fight the negative image in order to disassociate it from not only the project to ensure its success in order to eventually separate it from the population from which the perception originates. Unfortunately, the decision makers behind these economic opportunities are the most unwilling to risk investment in black communities. With black-owned businesses more than double between 1977 and 1987 and business ownership stabilized communities,102 perhaps the change in perception will have to come from within these communities themselves. Whatever the fate of Prince George’s County and future projects similar to Landover, they will continue to be strongly dictated by their image, an image that is in need of repair.


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