

# Eyesore to Asset: Adaptive Reuse of Vacant Retail

## Rethinking the Shopping Center for Workforce Housing & Entrepreneurship

BY: ASHON NESBITT

The full economic fallout from COVID-19 has yet to unfold but communities throughout Florida, and the nation, will soon be looking for new models for economic development for both big box retailers and smaller shopping centers. The Florida Housing Coalition recently released *Eyesore to Asset*, a comprehensive guidebook to help communities and commercial developers struggling in the face of a new economic reality: how to turn unused spaces into affordable workforce housing and workspaces. It is designed to aid local governments and business leaders in their search for new and innovative models for local economic development.

Two years in the making, the guidebook's genesis was born out of the Sustainable Communities Innovation Challenge (The Challenge) awarded by Fannie Mae to the Coalition in 2018. In partnership with the Florida Community Loan Fund (FCLF), Prof. Stephen Bender (UF), Brixmor Property Group, and Crossman & Company, the Coalition explored the feasibility of adapting vacant commercial spaces into attractive and functional mixed-use spaces with apartments and shared workspaces for low-income entrepreneurs.

We have been studying creative solutions to the affordable housing crisis before COVID-19, and now it is more critical than ever that local communities seek out new ways to look at vacant retail spaces. We were pleased to share our guidebook findings with the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) as a presenter in its series of webinars in June, which can be accessed at [www.icsc.com](http://www.icsc.com) under Attend & Learn, Virtual Series.



**Ashon Nesbitt** is the Chief Programs Officer and Technical Advisor with the Florida Housing Coalition, specializing in local government land use planning and affordable housing development. Ashon has Master's degrees in Urban and Regional Planning and Real Estate from the University of Florida, and a Bachelor of Science in Architectural Studies degree from Florida A&M University.

*Eyesore to Asset* details how vacant retail spaces can be used to bolster not only workforce housing, but support startup entrepreneurs as well. By envisioning these spaces in a new way, we can see how they can serve as assets in creating much-needed affordable housing in communities as well as providing people who may be out of work as a result of COVID-19 with affordable space to explore entrepreneurship.

*Eyesore to Asset: A Guidebook for Adaptive Reuse of Vacant Retail* is available for download on the Coalition's website at:

[www.flhousing.org/adaptive](http://www.flhousing.org/adaptive). 

